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AUGUST

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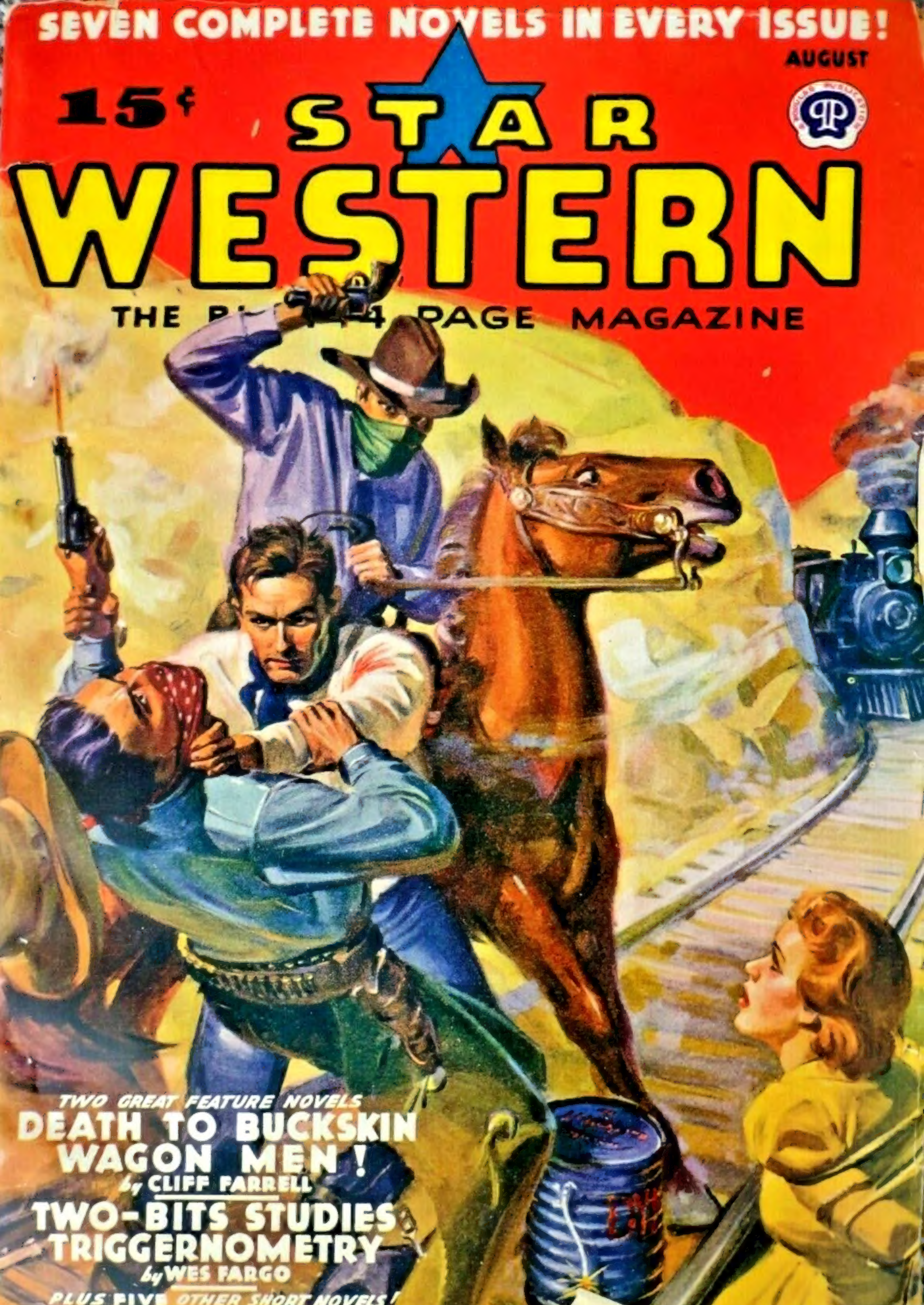
STAR WESTER

THE PULP 144 PAGE MAGAZINE



TWO GREAT FEATURE NOVELS

DEATH TO BUCKSKIN WAGON MEN!

by CLIFF FARRELL

TWO-BITS STUDIES TRIGGERNOMETRY

by WES FARGO

PLUS FIVE OTHER SHORT NOVELS!

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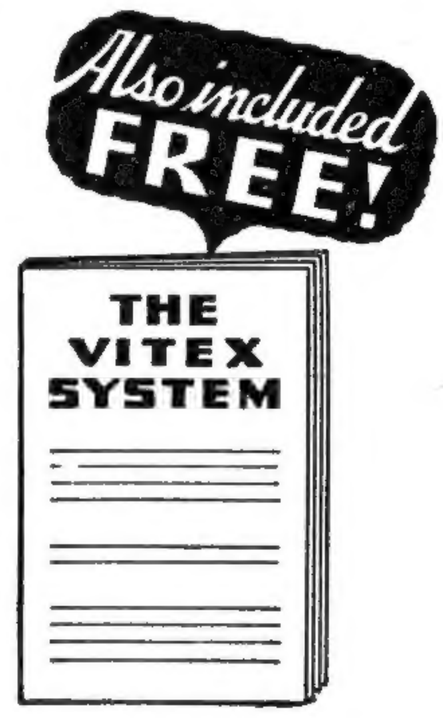

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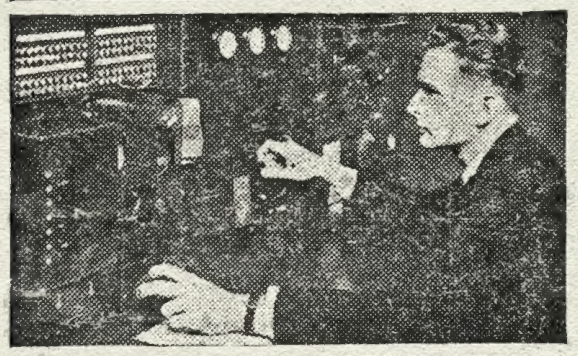

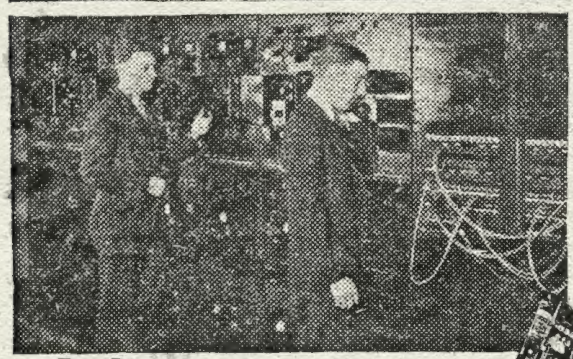

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J. E. Smith, President
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Top Picture

FIXING RADIO SETS in spare time pays many from $5 to $10 a week extra while learning. Full time work for Radio dealers, jobbers or manufacturers, servicing home and auto Radios, pays as much as $30, $40, $50 a week. Many Radio Technicians operate their own spare time and full time Radio Service businesses.

Center Picture

BROADCASTING STATIONS employ Radio Technicians as engineers, operators and pay well for trained men to fill interesting technical jobs with real futures.

Lower Picture

COMMERCIAL RADIO telephone and telegraph stations, Loudspeaker Systems, Police Radio, Aviation Radio, Experimental Radio stations, makers and users of industrial electronic devices are other fields employing qualified Technicians. Television promises many good jobs soon.

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SEPTEMBER ISSUE ON SALE AUGUST 2ND!

7 SHORT NOVELS

IN EACH ISSUE

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 144-PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME TWENTY-ONE AUGUST, 1940 NUMBER THREE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **Seven Complete Short Novels** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

DEATH TO BUCKSKIN WAGON MEN.....*CLIFF FARRELL* 6

Hidden gold in that white-topped caravan brought Jackson Hatcher's gun-buzzards circling down on those greenhorn miners—while the only man who could lead them out of that savage murder-trap was being hunted as a traitor and killer!

TWO-BITS STUDIES TRIGGERNOMETRY.....*WES FARGO* 34

Fodder for that stricken range might save a hundred struggling cow-folks from ruin. . . . But not if Ace Kinney and his greedy gun-crew could fill two empty graves—already marked with the names, "Two-Bits" and "Johnny Poe!"

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Why should Jim Shannon, honest rancher, set up the chief of the deadliest cattle-raiders as boss of Jim's own outfit—which that case-hardened old renegade had sworn to wreck?

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BARBWIRE, BULLETS—AND COWMAN COURAGE!....*NORRELL GREGORY* 92

When gun-hung nesters fenced off their summer range, and the powerful C Bar outfit rode in from the rear, it was a case of "Run or die" for the hard-working Sargent brothers. . . . Until a crimson boot-print showed them their last, slim fighting chance!

THE DEACON'S BLOOD BREAKS THE DROUTH...*ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY* 110

Must the lovable Deacon damn forever his desperate neighbors who had always put their faith in his gun-backed preachments—or must he doom young Rip Carson to years of stone-walled purgatory as a merciless, sure-bet murderer?

WHEN BLUE BLANKET CREEK RAN RED.....*KENNETH FOWLER* 126

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★ **Star Western Feature** ★

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 4

Where readers, writers and editors make medicine around a friendly camp-fire. . . .

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

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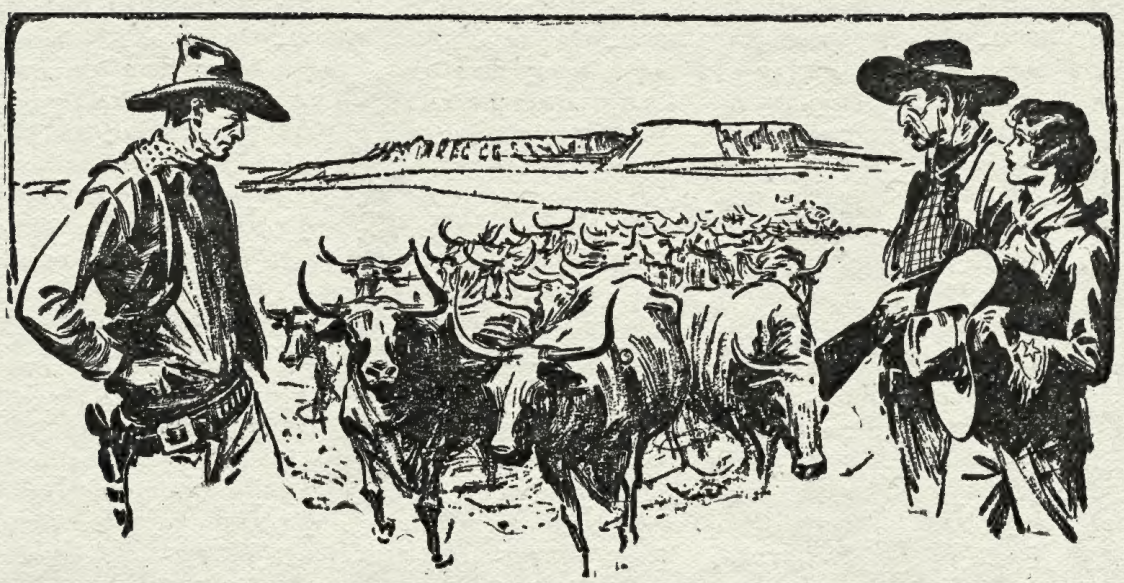

Up The Trail

WE ARE glad to print the following letter from Mr. Orin H. Read, of El Paso, who gives us a picture of cattle ranching, as it was done in the brasada country around the Nueces River, in the Lone Star State. It was no job, as Mr. Read points out, for anyone who put too high a value on his skin.

Editor, *Star Western.*
Sir:

Reading some of the fiction stories of the old West, and especially about the daily work of cowpunchers, reminds me that I do not often see stories about the toughest cattle-country that ever existed. I refer to the jungle-like territory between the Rio and the Nueces, where wild cattle are really wild, and a cowpuncher wishes that he had a hide like a hippopotamus. I remember we had a young fellow working with us who had drifted down from Wyoming to get out of fenced range, and he swore that he'd rather chase cows out of a tangle of all the barbwire in the country than work through that prickly pear, cactus, thorny mesquite and chaparral. He sure had a map of the State of Texas scratched on his hide before he left.

In that country, the only trails are those made by the wild cattle, because the brasada is so thick that it's impenetrable to a man or a horse. It was useless to try to run down the longhorns on the trails, because they had more twists and turns than a mad rattler. But a round-up in that country was something to see.

Our outfit used to get a small bunch of tame cattle—and by tame, I don't mean the gentle kind of barnyard stock you see so often on the northern ranches now—and put them near corral. The corrals were usually built of poles driven deep in the ground, and lashed together with rawhide.

We spread out then, using the greatest caution to work quietly, centering along those thorny cattle trails toward the corral and our branded decoys. It was tough, exacting work, for suddenly one of the longhorns would sight or smell a horse and rider. You could hear him snort, then hear the crashing of brush as it tried to make a getaway. And there was no guarantee that the pannicked longhorn wouldn't turn and run straight at you.

Chasing those cattle along the twisting trails was where the real work began. A man had to lean well over the neck of the pony to evade the slashing thorns, which reached out to snag a man from the saddle unless he was almighty careful. I've seen good men blinded and crippled from working the brush on those round-ups.

When the longhorns stampeded up to the tame cattle, and found that the decoys failed to join them in their dash for freedom, the wild ones would turn back, gradually mixing with the branded stock. It wasn't so tough from then on, for with a rider singing to the herd, the cattle would follow the sound of the voice, until the singer led them to the wings of the corral. The rest of the punchers then closed in, and we had 'em corraled. Only then did we take a little time off to patch ourselves up.

Orin H. Reed

Thank you, Mr. Read. Right now we can't promise a story of the brasada country, but we'll keep an eye out.

And here's something that sounds mighty good to us—a new Walt Coburn novel which just came in the mail as we were writing the answer to Mr. Read's letter. While Walt doesn't take us down to the brush-popping Texas country, he does, we believe, a grand job of work in telling the thrilling story of Clee Carson, a towheaded, fighting cowhand from Texas who hit for Montana and big trouble in that untamed cattle frontier.

Along with this powerfully human story, we'll meet some old friends—Johnny Poe and his half-pint pardner, Two-Bits, in another novel by Wes Fargo. Other *Star Western* writing men are also listed to make the September issue a fiction-feast to remember.

The date is August 2nd!

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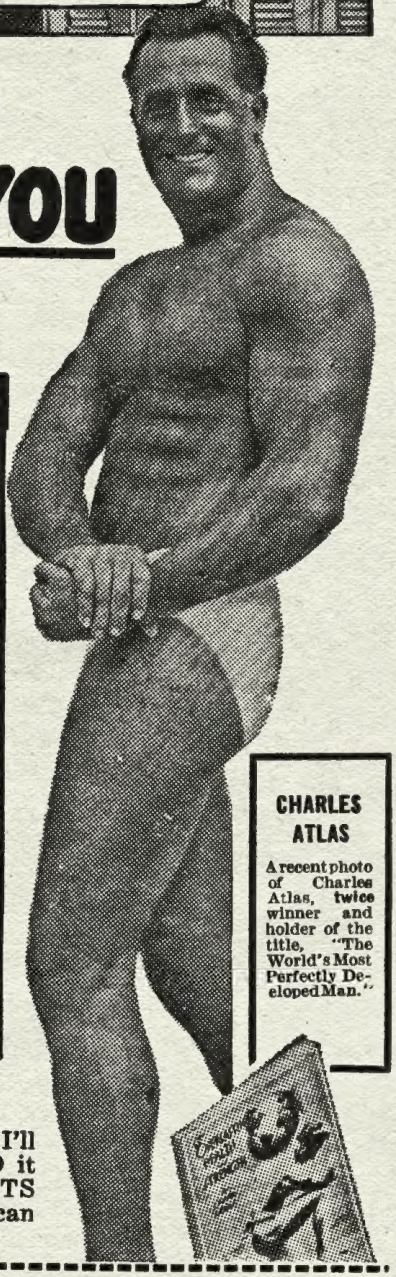

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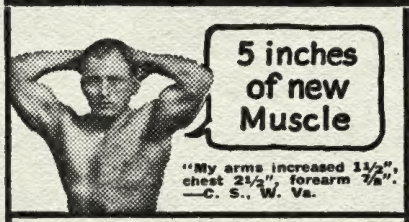

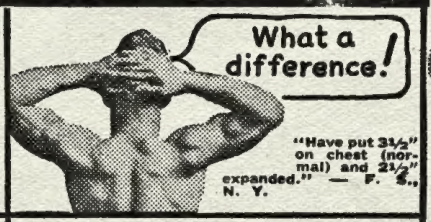

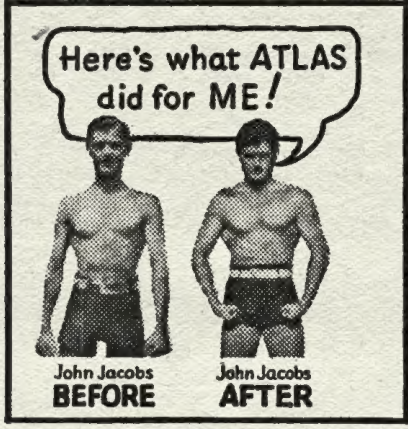

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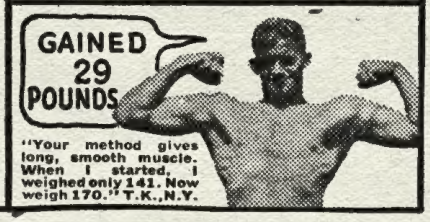

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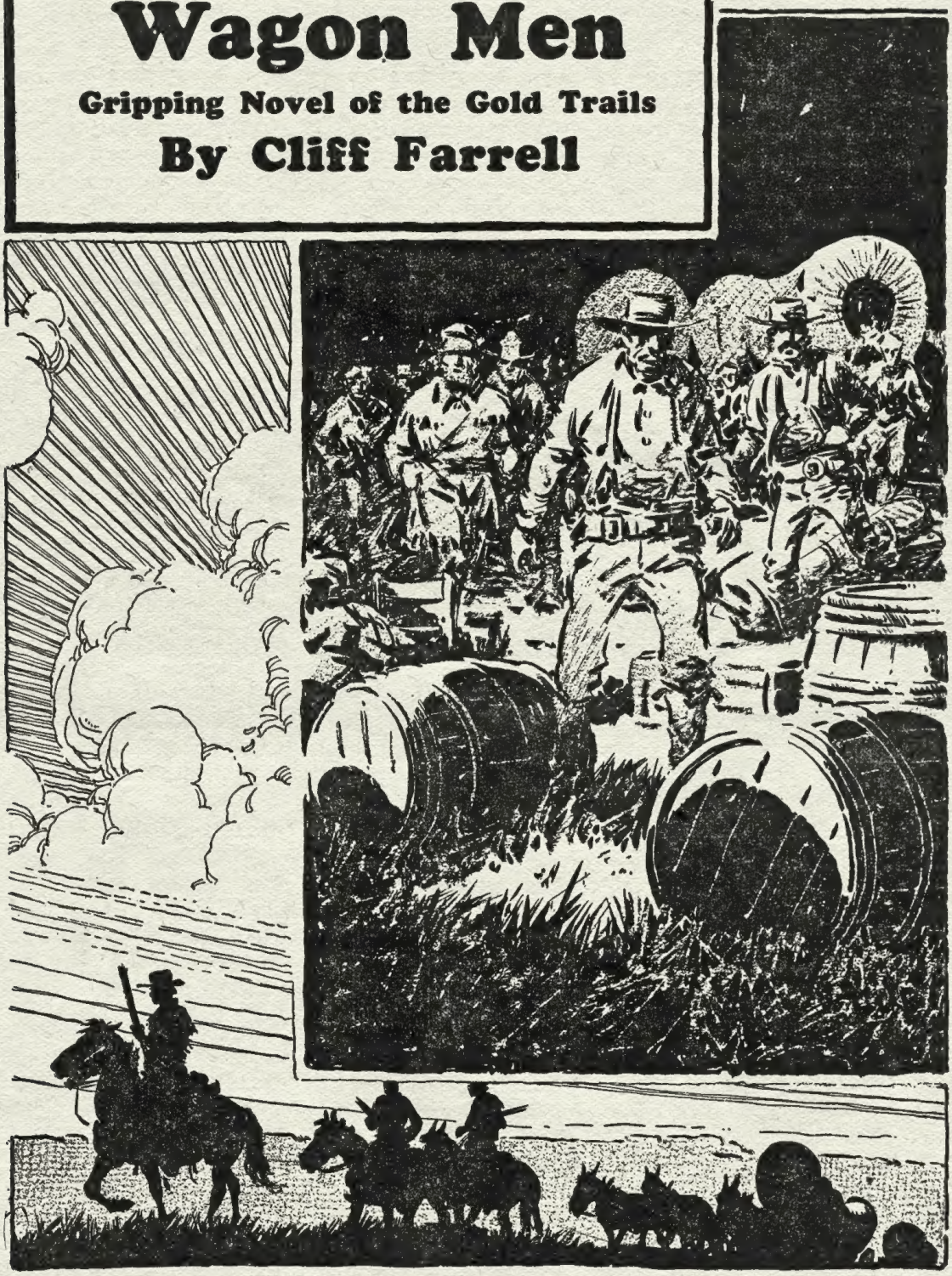
Death To Buckskin Wagon Men

Gripping Novel of the Gold Trails

By Cliff Farrell



Accused of murder, and with a blood-money price on his head, Zack Kildeer followed the trail of that doomed wagon-train straight to its rendezvous with death. . . . For no branded outcast could ever hope to tell those trusting greenhorn miners that their leader was a new kind of Judas, who sold them for bloody scalps instead of silver!

Chambeau, the knife still in his hand, was hurled a yard away. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Caravan of Doom

IN THE candlelight, the thin, incisive features of the trader, Jackson Hatcher, were hard as gunmetal. His dry voice reached no farther than the ears of the two buckskin-clad frontiersmen who sat across the table in a rear room at his

trading post on the Yellowstone River.

A buffalo robe had been draped over the single window to bar any inquisitive eye, and Hatcher's bodyguard, the big sinewy Jacques Chambeau, squatted on his moccasin heels against the split-log door to see that no unwanted visitors gained entrance.

The airless room reeked of pipe tobacco and whiskey fumes. The eyes of the two buckskin-clad men kept roving greedily to the stone jug which sat on the table.

Jackson Hatcher swore impatiently, his eyes following their hungry glance. He snatched the jug away and locked it in a cabinet. "You've had your belly-warmers," he said. "No more drinking until this job is finished. Let's go over this once more to make sure you know your orders. Don't forget that if either of you make a slip, it means your necks. And mine along with you."

Hatcher paused, letting that sink in. During that moment of silence the distant tinkle of blacksmith hammers on anvils, the thud of mallets on wagon tires and felloes rose from the early September darkness of the stockade yard. Muted by the intervening wall, men's voices and the tramp of boots sounded in the adjoining main room of the trading store where Hatcher's clerks were busy tending to the rush of wagon men.

A rumbling trail caravan of ten wagons, en route from the gold camps of the Idaho country to the northwest, was camped at Hatcher's Fort tonight. Here the travelers were refurnishing gear and livestock and provisioning for the next stretch of their journey to Fort Laramie, on the Platte.

Behind them lay the peaceful, army-patrolled country of the Shoshones. Ahead were the high plains where the Sioux Nation held forth. And the Sioux were taking scalps. That was why these eastbound wagon-folk had hesitated three days at Hatcher's Fort to look to their store of ammunition and to ask advice from the trader.

And that was why deep excitement burned inside of Jackson Hatcher as he whispered his instructions to the squawman, Simon Strawn, and the gangling, long-haired buffalo hunter, Teton Lusk.

"You'll swing them off the main trail at the Gray Bull ford, Lusk," he said. "It's two days' journey to the Malpais. Strawn will be waiting there with Ears-Of-The-Fox and his braves. They'll be camped below the big yellow butte that looks like a thumb. Strawn will let you know ahead of time before the Indians open the party, to give you a chance to take to the brush and stay out of harm's way."

"YOU certain these people are carryin' gold, Hatcher?" Simon Strawn questioned.

The squawman, fat and slovenly, wore his coarse, graying hair in a thick braid down his back. The smoky, pungent racial odor of an Indian encampment clung to him. Simon Strawn was a renegade, an outcast from his race. White men were offering rewards for his capture, dead or alive.

"Enough to keep you drunk the rest of your life, Strawn," Hatcher smiled coldly, but his green eyes lighted in anticipation. "Hell, man, you'll be able to buy all the young squaws that strike your fancy. I happen to know that three or four of the parties with this caravan hit it rich on Alder Creek. That's why they're in such a lather to get out of the country and back to civilization before winter comes, with their stakes. Why, they're even paying for grub in gold dust. Isn't that proof enough?"

"How about the Injuns?" Teton Lusk muttered. "What if the Fox decided to take thet dust fer hisself?"

"Blanket Indians on the warpath can't use gold," Hatcher snapped. "Ears-Of-

the-Fox will be more than satisfied with the scalps and plunder he takes. I'm sending a wagonload of guns and whiskey along with the caravan as an additional bonus to him. The gold will be our share. Quit belly-aching, Lusk. I'm offering you the chance to fill your pockets, and all you do is whine."

"It's me that's takin' the long chance," Teton Lusk snarled. "I'm supposed to travel with these long-hairs an' guide 'em into ambush. If'n there's any slip along the line, or if they git suspicious, they'll stretch my neck."

Hatcher looked him over with contempt. Teton Lusk was a craggy, powerful man with long arms dangling from sloping shoulders. Wearing greasy buckskins, he carried a skinning knife in a sheath, and had a six-shooter thrust in his belt.

"You're going through with this, my friend," Hatcher said softly. "You're walking with me out into that wagon camp presently, and I'll introduce you as the man who'll guide them to Laramie. You can't back out now, Lusk. Do you know why? No? Then listen."

Hatcher bent closer. "A young white woman pulled into this Fort yesterday," he murmured. "Her name is Tremaine. Mary Tremaine. She arrived from Fort Laramie with Father Mercy's pack train. She's heading for the Idaho gold camps in search of her brother who dropped out of sight. She's—Tom Tremaine's sister!"

HATCHER watched Lusk's clouded eyes blink, then he added: "What if I told her how Tom Tremaine and Zack Kildeer were murdered one night in their sleep by a man whose worthless life they had saved? What if I told her about the pokes of raw gold you took from the bodies of the men you knifed while they lay in their robes?"

Teton Lusk's hard face looked gray. "You devil!" he mumbled. "How'd you know about that?"

"Nothing happens in the Yellowstone country that doesn't come to my ears," Hatcher smiled. "An Indian, bent on horse-stealing, was bushed up that night, watching your camp. He saw you knife Tremaine and Kildeer, and he trailed you when you pulled out with the gold. He sold the information to me for the price of a jug of whiskey."

Hatcher's thin voice carried a tone of triumph. He was enjoying Teton Lusk's chagrin. "That's why I asked you to throw in with Strawn and myself in this other matter," he added. "I happen to know that you brought the stolen gold with you when you pulled in here today. Fact is, I searched your saddlepacks this evening, and transferred the dust to a place of safe-keeping."

Lusk's little eyes blazed. "It's mine," he raged. "You kain't—"

"Don't lose your temper, Lusk. We're partners aren't we? I'm giving you the chance to earn yourself an even bigger stake. We'll pool your gold with what we get from this other enterprise, and split the entire pile up among the three of us. How does that sound? Or would you prefer to face Mary Tremaine and tell her that it was your knife that tore through her brother's heart?"

Lusk sat snarling, his slow mind working. At last he relaxed, and a wry grimace showed on his loose lips. "You're a smart one, Hatcher," he acknowledged with grudging admiration. "I figgered I was puttin' one over on you. I reckon I'll string along with you. I'll be richer thataway."

"And healthier," Hatcher added sardonically. He arose, motioning Lusk to follow. "We'll go out and meet Long John Carver, the leader of the outfit," he added.

He turned to Strawn. "Stay here until I come back, Simon," he advised, "so as to make sure there's no change in plans. I'll be gone only a few minutes. Keep out

of sight and bar the door. Above all don't let Father Mercy see you inside this fort. He's no fool, and we've got to be careful."

Chambeau, the lithe-bodied breed, unbarred the door and made sure the coast was clear. Then he and Hatcher and Teton Lusk walked through the trading post and into the stockade yard.

WORKING in the ruddy light of the cookfires, men were busy greasing wheels and tightening bolts on the ten canvas-tilted wagons which were drawn up in the enclosure. There was the occasional flutter of a skirt around the wagons, and the pleasant sound of a feminine voice. Two of the travelers were accompanied by their wives on this eastward journey.

Hatcher and Lusk strode into the fire-lit circle. "Good news, friends," Hatcher called. "Meet Teton Lusk, your guide to the Platte. He knows every inch of the plains from the Yellowstone to Laramie, and I've induced him to blaze trail for you."

There was a rumble of jubilation. Bearded men, their palms calloused by the hard labor of the gold diggings, crowded around. They were visibly impressed by Teton Lusk's powerful physique and primitive garb. There was no denying that here stood a man who had spent his life in the buffalo country.

"You figger there's any chance o' Injun trouble?" Long John Carver, captain of the caravan, asked anxiously. "They say the Sioux are out down the trail."

"I don't hone to lose my topknot any quicker'n the next man," Lusk declared. "I got a new route through the hills in mind that'll fool the Injuns. They're watchin' the main trail, but we'll swing west o' the Bozeman. It'll take a leetle longer, but it'll be a danged sight safer."

"I know the route Lusk aims to follow," Hatcher nodded. "And I'll guarantee that you'll get through without trouble."

Long John Carver shook hands with Lusk. "Hatcher's word is good enough for us," he boomed. "How 'bout stretchin' out at daybreak. We're in a sweat to git out'n the plains before snow flies."

"Suits me," Lusk nodded. "I'll land you at Laramie inside o' three weeks as easy as. . . ."

His little eyes dilated, staring at something in the background. The bystanders turned.

A lean, rawboned man in weather-faded buckskins had appeared from the shadows of the wagons. Dead silence fell as the stranger moved forward. His eyes, flaming with bitter irony, were fixed solely upon Teton Lusk.

Lusk took a step back, but the man kept advancing. He was in his middle twenties, and his gaunt, tanned cheeks hinted at recent privations and hard trails. He wore moccasins, and his buckskin breeches were shrunken so that three inches of his bare shank showed. A loose hunting shirt of doe-skin completed his attire, for he wore no covering on his thick dark hair which hung almost to his shoulders in the frontier style.

Teton Lusk backed away until he brought up against a wagonwheel and could retreat no farther. It was only then that the intruder spoke.

"Cornered like a wolf, eh, Lusk?"

"Why're you lookin' at me like that?" Teton Lusk mumbled. "I never done nothin' to you, Kildeer."

Zack Kildeer's arms flashed out, and his fingers closed on Lusk's throat.

"This is for Tom Tremaine," he said softly.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Takes a Hand

WITH a wild outcry Teton Lusk exploded into desperate action, lashing out with fists and moccasined feet.

They reeled away, and fell to the ground, rolling in a flurry of arms and legs into a cook-fire. Lusk broke Zack Kildeer's throat-grip. His six-shooter had fallen from his belt, but he managed to snatch out his skinning knife with the lightning-like motion of a panther.

The onlookers gasped as they saw the flash of cold steel in the firelight. Zack Kildeer wore a six-shooter in his belt, but he had no time to get at the weapon. He managed to grab Lusk's knife arm before the blade could be brought in play, and held it away from his breast.

They arose partly to their feet in a deadlock. Sinews corded on their necks, and ridged along their jaws. Then Lusk, in spite of his greater height and heavier build, began to crumble. His clawing moccasins slipped in the dust.

He twisted around suddenly, hoping to heel his opponent, but Zack Kildeer let his weight follow the movement so that both of them went down again.

They writhed over, rolling beneath a wagon and out of the firelight, beyond the circle. Zack braced himself and surged to one knee with a hand again clamped on Lusk's throat, the other pinning the man's knife arm to the ground.

"You weasel," he panted. "You put a knife in Tom Tremaine's heart that night, but you missed mine. I pulled through. I've been trailin' you for two moons, an'

They rolled in a flurry of arms and legs. . . .

finally run you to tree. Where's the gold you took from our packs? Talk fast. Where is it?"

He slacked his throat grip a trifle so that Lusk could answer. "Don't kill me," Lusk gasped.

The wagon folk were crowding into view now, anxious to see the end of this combat, but none of them had arrived in time to hear their panting conversation.

"Where's the dust?" Zack grated. "Damn you, where'd you cache it?"

Lusk's face was a mask of horror. "I'll tell, if you let me live," he panted. "It's—"

Zack felt something graze his hair. There was a crisp, pinging sound and Teton Lusk's choked voice snapped like a thread. His body hardened, and his spine arched in a bridge of agony.

Zack incredulously looked at the quivering handle of a horn-gripped knife which was driven deep in Teton Lusk's throat. The knife had been thrown from somewhere behind him.

Warm blood spurted, and Teton Lusk's lungs made a whistling sound. Then his rigid muscles slacked. He fell back, quivering, then lay still, taking with him the secret Zack Kildeer had sought to wring from his lips.

ZACK rose to his feet, dumbfounded. The bystanders moved closer. They peered down at the dead man, and then looked at Zack in silence.

Jackson Hatcher pushed through the crowd. "You bloodthirsty devil," he thundered at Zack. "What do you mean, coming into a peaceful trading post and murdering a man before our eyes?"

Zack was bewildered. He realized that in the shadows the bystanders might not have seen that thrown knife. "Glory," he panted. "It wasn't me that snuffed him, Hatcher. Not that he didn't deserve it; he got his needin's. But that knife was thrown by somebody, an' I got a hunch it was meant for me. It missed me an' got Lusk. I heard it buzz past my ear. Then *ker-plunk*—an' Teton Lusk was a good Injun. It was somebody else that counted that coup, you mind my word."

"Ridiculous," Hatcher snapped. "It was murder. You deserve to be hung."

Zack's dark eyes chilled. "Even if I had made meat of him, it wouldn't be crime in my reckonin'," he said slowly. "I don't aim to have my neck stretched for it, either! It was a fair fight. He drew steel on me. I fought him rawhanded."

"That's right, Hatcher," Long John Carver spoke up dubiously. "Lusk was the first to draw knife. We all saw that. In a way you can't blame this man. Who is this feller? You seem to know him."

"I have some slight acquaintance with him," Hatcher said grimly. "He calls himself Zack Kildeer. He's a buffalo hunter, I believe. And a squawman, no doubt. This isn't the first time he's been in trouble, but it'll be the last, I promise you."

There was a deadly glint in Hatcher's face. Zack and Jackson Hatcher had clashed a time or two in the past over matters of hunting rights and fur prices. Zack remembered these things and believed he understood why Hatcher was so quick to condemn him.

"I'm a hunter," Zack said with pride, "but nary a squawman. Been too busy seein' the country to take myself a woman up to now."

"What was your grudge against Lusk?" Long John asked. "He acted like he was seein' the devil himself when he sighted you."

"He had reason to," Zack nodded. "He left me for dead three moons ago, up in the Blackfoot country. I pardnered up with a young feller named Tom Tremaine last spring on a prospectin' trip. We hit paydirt, an' washed out nigh onto two hundred ounces before we

cleaned up. Headin' out of the mountains, we found Teton Lusk, with a Nez Perce arrow in his leg. The Injuns had ambushed him, run off his saddle stock, an' left him to starve.

"The cuss was in pitiful shape. I'd cut his sign a time or two in the past, an' had no liking for him, but we made camp, an' spent two weeks doctorin' him. But he must have smelled the gold we had in our packs.

"He waited till we was asleep one night, then drove his knife into Tom Tremaine's heart. He gave me the steel too, an' left me for dead when he pulled out with the gold. I come within a whisker of goin' over the long trail, but a Shoshone Indian found me, an' him and his squaw nursed me back to life. As soon as I got on my feet, I cold-trailed Lusk. I heard he had headed for Hatcher's Fort. That's how come I showed up here tonight."

Jackson Hatcher uttered a snort of derision. "A clever way of twisting the truth," he exploded. "It happens that I heard the real story from Teton Lusk only an hour ago. Lusk was Tom Tremaine's partner, and *you* were the scoundrel they found dying and nursed back to life. You killed Tremaine and knifed Lusk, then fled with the gold. You believed Lusk was dead, but when you saw him here tonight, you realized your mistake. So you tried to silence him in a hurry, hoping to protect your secret. I wondered what your story would be, so I waited to give you enough rope to hang yourself. And you fell into the trap, Kildeer."

Hatcher stepped back, and gestured. "Take him, boys," he barked. And half a dozen of his *partisans,* led by Jacques Champeau, rushed forward and spread out to encircle him.

ZACK moved back with a swift stride, and his Navy pistol came into his hand. "Lusk lied," he said harshly. "I told the truth, Hatcher. Stand back. I don't aim to be taken for a crime I didn't do."

A new voice spoke resonantly. "Peace, my friends. Call off your men, Hatcher."

An aging man, who wore the travel-faded cassock of a missionary, moved into the circle and pushed Zack's gun down. This was Father Mercein, the Franciscan priest, better known as Father Mercy in the ten thousand square miles of wilderness where he preached the Word and ministered impartially to men, both red and white.

The missionary father was worn and weathered by years on the trails, but within him burned an inner fire that lifted him above and apart.

"Let us have no more bloodshed, my son," he said to Zack.

"If it comes, it won't be of my askin', Father," Zack stated grimly.

"Stand aside, Father," Jackson Hatcher demanded. "Surely you don't condone murder. This man just killed Teton Lusk."

"I heard Kildeer's story," the Franciscan said gravely, "and I doubt if it was murder. I have known both Zack Kildeer and Teton Lusk for several years. In the matter of one man's word against the other, I must give the benefit of the doubt to Kildeer."

"Bah," Hatcher scoffed. "You stick to your preaching and baptizing, Father, and let me handle the practical matters."

"Mebbe the Father is right, Hatcher," Long John Carver spoke up dubiously. "After all it was a fair fight. I admit I don't put much stock in Kildeer's story that somebody threw that knife. As to who killed Tom Tremaine, it's only one man's word ag'in another. But there ain't much doubt that Kildeer's got a clean case of self-defense in what happened here tonight. Lusk was first to draw steel. We all seen that."

Hatcher sensed that Carver was rep-

resenting majority opinion among the wagon-folk. He hesitated, frowning, and then shrugged. He motioned his *partisans* to withdraw.

"It seems that I'm over-ruled," he said. "But you're wrong, my friends. The good father here is mistaken about Kildeer's character. I know the man's real nature. However, out of respect to the ladies who are my guests tonight, I'll forego any further distasteful scenes of violence."

He looked at Zack. "You've worn out your welcome at this fort, and in this region, Kildeer," he added. "I'll give you twenty-four hours to make tracks out of the Yellowstone country. After that time, my agents and trappers will have orders to arrest you or shoot you on sight. I owe that much to the man you murdered here tonight."

Zack began an angry protest, then fell silent. He was infuriated by Jackson Hatcher's attitude, but he was puzzled also. The differences that had arisen between them in the past hardly seemed to justify Hatcher's present high-handed hostility. Zack sensed that there was some deeper motive for the man's rancor, but he searched his mind in vain for the answer.

He shrugged and turned away from the trader. "Thank you, Father," he said awkwardly to the Franciscan. "It looks like you saved my hair."

CHAPTER THREE

Devil From the Earth

LONG JOHN CARVER suddenly snapped his fingers in dismay. "By glory!" he exclaimed. "In all the hubbub I durned near forgot that this leaves us in a pickle. Lusk's dead, now we've got nobody to guide us to the Platte!"

"Perhaps Zack Kildeer will assist you," Father Mercy suggested quietly. "He knows the country as well as any man."

"What?" Hatcher exploded. "Did you hear, Carver? The good Father suggests that you place your lives in the hands of a known murderer!" He laughed thinly. "Perhaps Kildeer will knife a few more men from time to time, just to keep you entertained during the trip to Fort Laramie."

Long John looked at Father Mercy, then shook his head. "I reckon not," he said decisively. "We'll wait till we find someone else."

Zack's mouth tightened but he said nothing. In his heart he couldn't blame him. They had given him the benefit of the doubt, but it was plain that the doubt was still there, nevertheless.

Jackson Hatcher slapped Long John on the back. "A wise decision, Carver," he approved. "I'm glad that you're more practical than Father Mercy."

"How soon kin you find us another guide?" Carver asked glumly. "I reckon this means another delay."

Hatcher thought it over a moment, rubbing his hatchet-like chin. "Winter isn't far away," he ruminated, "and it's high time you were pulling out if you expect to get through. You're in a tough spot, and I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll guide you through myself!"

The wagon people aroused eagerly. "Do you mean that?" Carver demanded joyfully.

The trader smiled. "I don't mind saying that I'd enjoy a taste of civilization myself, and this is a good excuse to get away from the post for awhile. I've been buried in this wilderness for four years now without a vacation. I'll guide you through, friends. I know the route Lusk intended to follow—better than Lusk, perhaps. I'm no tenderfoot in this region; Father Mercy can tell you that."

The missionary nodded. "No man should know the trails better," he smiled. "Friend Hatcher should make a guide you can rely upon. You're fortunate, Carver.

I would have offered my services, but duty compels me to depart tomorrow for the Blackfoot country to the north."

Carver wrung Hatcher's hand. "It's a mighty welcome favor you're doin' us, Hatcher. When kin we start?"

"I see no reason why I can't be ready at dawn," Hatcher decided. "It won't take long to arrange affairs here."

Zack moved out of earshot then. The wagon-folk were jubilant over their good luck, and the rumble of their voices followed him as he moved into the darker area at the rear of the fort yard. He approached the stockade wall, intending to scale it and return to his Indian pony which he had left tied up in the forest beyond the fort clearing.

There was no other means of exit, for the main gates had, as usual, been closed and barred at twilight. No lookouts were maintained on the parapet however, for Hatcher's post had always enjoyed a fortunate immunity from Indian attack. Hatcher's luck, the trappers called it. Zack had entered the fort by scaling the stockade, and now he looked for protruding knots to offer a toehold so that he could depart by the same route.

But there was the rustle of a skirt. A feminine figure hurried out of the shadows, and a girl's voice thinned by excitement said: "Wait!"

SHE came within arm's length. The moon was rising now, but she had her back to it so that her face was only a shadowy blur. She was young, and had thick, dark hair. Dressed in the tight-bodiced wide-skirted style of the time, she was firm-waisted, and with poise. Not a frail girl, nor a Juno, but one who had reliance and grace.

"You—you knew Tom Tremaine?" she asked.

Zack peered, wishing he could see her face. "I knew him," he nodded. "Why?" His voice was curt, harsh. His sinews were quivering, for the reaction of that fight with Teton Lusk was upon him now.

Her answer startled him. "I'm Tom Tremaine's sister. I'm Mary Tremaine."

Zack could only stare. "I stayed in Leavenworth when my brother left for the Idaho gold country," she explained hurriedly. "He wrote regularly, and his last letter mentioned that he was going prospecting with a plainsman whose name he forgot to mention. I waited months, hoping to hear from him. At last I started for the Idaho country, hoping to find some trace of him in the mining camps. I was fortunate in being able to join with Father Mercy's pack train at Fort Laramie, and he brought me safely through the Sioux country. I was going on with Father Mercy to Idaho, but it seems that —that there's no use looking for my brother now."

Her voice was breaking a little now. "I feared it would turn out that way," she added huskily. "If he had been alive I'd have heard from him. He was a good brother. You—you gave him decent burial. . . ?"

Zack nodded. "As best I could," he said. "I couldn't exactly recollect the words that Father Mercy would have used, but—I tried."

She bowed her head, choking back a sob. "Thank you," she murmured. "Thank you—for that, at least." And she started to turn away.

A surge of sudden furious resentment tore through Zack. He caught her arm. "You don't really believe that, do you?" he challenged. "You think I'm lyin'. You believe what Hatcher said. You think I killed your brother."

She tried to draw away, but Zack forced her to look at him.

"I don't know what to think," she burst out. "How could I know? I never saw you before tonight. Mr. Hatcher is an honest, responsible man. If he be-

lieves that you killed my brother, he must have good reason."

Slowly Zack released her, his temper coming to white heat. "Teton Lusk stole two hundred ounces of gold from me an' your brother," he snapped. "That dust is still in the country. Lusk never had a chance to spend it. Likely he was headin' for the Kansas settlements to begin blowin' it. It's my guess he had it with him when he came to this fort, but likely he cached it somewheres. I aim to try to find it and if I ever do locate it, half of it will be yours. I never killed Tom Tremaine. He was my pardner, my friend. I don't give a hang whether you or anybody else believes that. It's enough that Tom, wherever he is on the other side of the Divide, knows the truth."

He turned, caught a handhold on the slab face of the stockade wall, scaled the parapet, and dropped into the outer darkness. And only the half-stifled sobs of Mary Tremaine came to him as he made his way beyond the stockade wall.

ZACK'S step lagged a trifle, and the angry pride began to burn away, leaving the dull ash of weary remorse in his mind. Pushing through the moon-dappled undergrowth he located his picketed pony. The animal whickered a soft welcome, and he stood there beside it for a time, considering his future plans.

Prudence counseled that he leave the country at once. Jackson Hatcher's word was law in this region, and Zack had no illusions as to the danger he would be inviting by defying the period of grace the trader had given him.

Still, according to Zack's hunch, the dust that Teton Lusk had stolen was near at hand, hidden somewhere either in or near the fort. And he now regretted that he had let his pride deter himself from offering a more complete defense of his actions to Mary Tremaine. Zack admitted that the girl could not be condemned for being swayed by the opinion of the wealthy trader, as against the word of a buckskin-clad wanderer like himself. He decided that he must talk to Mary Tremaine again, and plead his case more convincingly. He could not let such a suspicion linger in her mind; he owed himself at least that much.

Loosing the pony's picket line, he led the animal farther away into the forest. Finding another grassy clearing, he staked the animal out to graze again.

Shouldering his meager camp pack he made his way back to the vicinity of the fort. A heavy thicket of chokecherry and buffaloberry brush grew rankly, not a dozen rods from the rear wall of the stockade. It appealed to him as a good hiding place. Even if any of Hatcher's *partisans* scouted the vicinity for him during the night, they would hardly look for him there in the very shadow of the post.

He wormed his way into the heart of the thicket by way of a game trail. Spreading his buffalo robe in the deep shadows beneath overhanging brush, he stretched out, and drew from his grub pouch a packet of flaked jerky. It was food, though dry, salty and requiring patience to masticate, but he washed it down with draughts from his water pouch, and it sated his hunger.

He rolled up in the robe, and touched the healed knife scar that Teton Lusk's knife had left near his heart, reflecting upon the ironic justice that had overtaken the man. Who had thrown the blade that killed Lusk? Hatcher? That was out of the question, for Hatcher had been surrounded by the wagon men at the time, and could not possibly have committed the act without being seen.

But there was Hatcher's crew of half-breed *engages* to consider. Perhaps one of them had taken a hand. Zack still believed that the blade had been intended for his own back and not for Lusk.

His head slowly lifted, and his body

tightened. The rising moon glittered on the foliage overhead, and he heard the swish of wings as a hunting owl sailed above him. A jay stirred somewhere in the timber, lifting a sleepy croak, then fell silent.

These were the normal sounds of the night, but there was something else stirring—an alien presence somewhere. Zack drew his six-shooter and edged farther back into the dense shadows.

His nerves came to an edge as he saw a heap of dry brush stir eerily a dozen yards from where he lay. Then the pile of twigs and dried evergreen lifted, and a shadow reared from the earth.

For an instant, Zack believed it was a bear. Then the figure rose to its height in the moonlight, and Zack stared incredulously as he recognized the gross-bodied, paunchy man who wore his hair in two long braids down his back.

ON ONE or two occasions in the past Zack had seen the renegade Simon Strawn, for whom the Army had lately offered a dead or alive reward. Simon Strawn, traitor to his race, was accused of being in league with Ears-Of-The-Fox, a bloodthirsty Brule sub-chief who led a band of fiery young braves and tribal malcontents. The scourge of the Bozemain trail, that Indian's depredations were mainly responsible for the general bloody strife that was spreading over the plains.

A smoky, oily tang came from Simon Strawn's slovenly Indian garments. He dressed like a Sioux, and acted like a Sioux. And he smelled like a Sioux. He never realized that Zack was watching him as he replaced the brush over the opening in the earth. He turned and crept out of the thicket over the same game trail by which Zack had entered.

Zack lay there waiting a moment, then he investigated the heap of brush. He was not surprised to find the mouth of a tunnel beneath the concealment. He guessed that the burrow led to some point inside the trading post. Such secret exits were common to frontier strongholds for use in case of Indian siege.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hidden Gold

ZACK wondered if Strawn's knowledge of this entrance to the fort meant that an Indian raid was being planned. Or had the renegade been secretly visiting someone in the trading post?

There was one way to make sure. Cocking an ear to the opening, he satisfied himself that the tunnel held no other lurking human. Then he lowered himself into it.

The tunnel was well built, shored with timbers, and feeling his way through the impenetrable blackness he moved ahead. He judged that he was well past the stockade and below the fort yard, when the shaft curved slightly, and he detected the promise of light ahead.

Now he heard the faint sound of men's voices. Overhead was the puncheon floor of a room, and he saw the outline of a trap-door. Candlelight glinted through the cracks in the floor.

Jackson Hatcher's voice, lowered to a cautious pitch, sounded overhead. "Even if you killed the wrong man, Jacques, you pulled me out of a nasty mess. That weakling would have given up head to everything he knew if you hadn't taken a hand."

"But I am disgrace, m'sieur," the purring voice of the French breed, Jacques Chambeau, sounded. "I weep weeth shame to theenk that I, Jacques Chambeau, have miss so easy a target. But they fight like the cat and the dog, these two. They squirm and roll. Eet was dark, and I have but leetle time to take the careful aim. So I throw queekly, praying my blade weel fly true. *Sacrés.* I beat my breast

when I see that I have pierced the wrong man."

"Forget it," Hatcher said. "You're traveling with me when we pull out with the caravan, Jacques. Now help me with this. Hold the sack open while I pour this in. Steady. Don't make me spill any; this stuff's valuable."

Zack could hear their suppressed breathing, and fierce satisfaction throbbed in him. He had learned the identity of the man who had hurled the knife that took Teton Lusk's life. Furthermore, his hunch that the blade had been meant for his own back was verified.

Hatcher was speaking again: "Keno. Tie it now, Jacques, and carry it out to our wagon. Store it in on the bottom of the supply of grain. A bag of oats is an innocent-looking article. Merely commonplace horse-fodder, eh."

ZACK heard the half-breed shoulder a burden. "Eet ees a trifle heavy, m'sieur," the man chuckled. "But Jacques, he weel handle eet weeth care. A very, very nice sack of oats, to be sure!"

Hatcher laughed. Zack heard the scrape of the door-bar. Then both of them left the room above, and the door banged shut.

Zack waited a moment, then rose and tried the trap with his shoulder. The square of planks lifted, and he looked around at the small room, lined with shelves containing ledgers and files. Hatcher's private office.

He climbed into the room, and scanned it with narrowed eyes. A film of spilled wild oats covered the puncheon floor at one point.

Zack moved across the room, picked up two empty buckskin pokes that had been tossed into a corner. Curiously excited, Zack turned them in his hands, recognizing familiar scars and details on these worn containers.

These pokes were the ones that had contained the dust he and Tom Tremaine had dug from that placer in the Blackfoot country in the spring. These were the heavy containers that Teton Lusk had taken from their saddle packs the night he fled from the camp, where he had left both Tom Tremaine and Zack for dead. There was no mistake about what Hatcher had poured into the grain sack!

He replaced the pouches where he had found them, then retreated back into the tunnel. Replacing the trap, he retraced his way through the shaft and emerged into the moonlight in the thicket.

Placing the heap of dry brush carefully over the opening, he stood erect and lifted a clenched fist in elation. "That's why Hatcher was just as well pleased that Lusk was killed," he muttered grimly. "Lusk had likely left the dust with the trader for safe-keepin'. Hatcher's smart, an' quick. He figured that Lusk's death was a windfall that had come his way. When he saw that Lusk had died before he could confess to me where to find the gold, he decided to keep it for himself. That's why he was so anxious to have me hung, and likely why he also decided to guide the wagon outfit to Laramie—to get the stake out of the country in a hurry."

Then he remembered Simon Strawn, and frowned. Had the renegade been in the tunnel merely to listen and spy upon Hatcher? Or had he actually been conferring secretly with the trader?

The latter surmise seemed the most plausible. Zack remembered the immunity from Indian attack that Hatcher's Fort enjoyed in the midst of a hostile country where most trading posts and settlements had been ravaged.

"Hatcher's no fool," he decided. "Strawn is in league with the Injuns, and he likely keeps Strawn bribed to be left alone. I reckon that's why Hatcher is so sure that wagon train will get through to Laramie without bein' attacked."

He spat in disgust. "Hatcher ought to have hung Strawn, instead o' hagglin' with him," he told himself.

Zack moved his robes even deeper into the thickets and turned in. He wondered if that secret entrance to the fort would be used by any other visitors, and he awakened at each sound. But Simon Strawn did not return, and the night passed with no further alarm.

HE AWAKENED as the morning star was blazing in the sky, and the fort was astir. Cookfires sprang into life within the stockade, and a rumble of activity arose as the stock was brought out of the corral. The caravan was preparing to hit the trail for Fort Laramie.

Zack retreated to where his pony awaited. He cinched down the pad saddle, laced his camp pack in place, mounted and rode away.

An hour later, with the sun rising, he watched from cover on a ridge at a mile's distance as the wagon train stretched out from the fort. One by one the canvas-hooded vehicles lumbered from the stockade gate toward the nearby river ford.

Once across the river they formed in a single column on the rough mountain trail. With whip lashes crackling they rolled on into the forest, waving and shouting a last good-bye to the men who stood on the north bank of the river watching their departure.

Zack kept the caravan in sight as it crept ponderously ahead. There were eleven wagons in all. The original vehicles, travel-stained and trail-scarred, led the way with Hatcher's fresh-painted Pittsburgh prairie schooner, fitted with its new top of snow-white canvas, bringing up the rear. And Zack saw that Jacques Chambeau and two breed swampers were in charge of the trader's wagon as it pulled away.

Hatcher himself rode ahead, piloting the way and riding alongside the lead vehicle. It was this leading wagon that held Zack's attention. There were two feminine figures riding in the bow. One was a middle-aged buxom woman—Long John Carver's wife, Zack decided. The other was Mary Tremaine.

Zack was not surprised that the girl had abandoned the quest for her brother, and was turning back to Leavenworth. Her presence on the Carver wagon was the lodestone that held his interest, and it was also the magnet that kept Jackson Hatcher close at its side, whenever trail duties permitted.

After the noon halt the wagons stretched out again. And Zack frowned as he watched Hatcher lead the way off the main trail and push westward, lifting an arm and waving commandingly. The eleven wagons swung through timber, picked their way over a ridge, and descended to the course of a mountain

stream that came down from tumbled hills.

ZACK'S perplexity grew as the wagons crawled ahead. The course they were taking would inevitably lead them into a maze of badlands which made a nightmare of the country only a dozen miles ahead. No wagon train could possibly cross that labyrinth of cutbanks, shale slants, and cedar brakes.

Zack expected them to veer to the south again and parallel the general course of the Bozeman Trail, but Hatcher still led them boldly ahead.

The going became rougher. They left the creek, and toiled their way along a boulder-studded bench. Ax men were now forced to slash passage for the wagons through stands of scrub cedar and buck brush.

Zack saw that Carver and other men were questioning the choice of trail. Hatcher was being called back often to confer and debate with them. But the trader lulled their doubts each time, and once more they labored ahead.

Sundown came, and both the weary livestock and humans were palpably glad when Carver located a camp site in a brushy clearing where there was adequate graze for the stock. Zack watched them form the wagons in the frontier phalanx. Cookfires began lifting fragant blue smoke. Dusk settled soothingly, and the glowing fires of the wagon camp became a tiny segment of life amid the loneliness of the wild hills.

Zack had retreated out of gunshot sound of the caravan during the afternoon, and had brought down two rabbits with his six-shooter. He made his own smokeless cookfire in a deep ravine in the twilight, and satisfied his ravenous hunger.

Then, with deep darkness settling, he left his camp and returned to scout the wagon train on foot.

He circled the clearing, and wormed his way toward the wagons, taking advantage of the scattered brush and long grass. Avoiding the three men who were guarding the grazing mules, he wormed his way into the shadow of the camp. He knew that he was risking his life as he lay there peering into the firelit circle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Trail to Nowhere

THE camp was preparing to turn in for the night. Long John Carver was stretching a tarp sleeping shelter alongside his wagon to give privacy to his wife and Mary Tremaine.

The girl herself was busy washing the cooking utensils, and Zack watched her. It had been a long time since he had seen a young white woman, and never, he told himself, had he seen one as comely as this girl. As she finished her chore, Jackson Hatcher, who had been hovering in the background, approached. He bowed with polished grace, and spoke to her.

She smiled and answered lightly, and she permitted the trader to take her arm and escort her to the sleeping shelter that Long John had built. Hatcher kissed her hand as he said good-night, and Zack saw the high color mount into her cheeks as she turned quickly and entered the sleeping quarters. Then Hatcher strolled languidly away. And Zack's initial antagonism toward the trader suddenly crystallized into fierce hostility.

Not until that moment did Zack realize how recklessly he had been building romantic air castles around himself and Mary Tremaine. But now he was brought back to reality with a sickening crash.

Over and over during the day he had let his imagination run riot, picturing himself stealing into the wagon camp like a daring Lochinvar, gaining Mary Tremaine's ear in secret and pleading his innocence of her brother's murder with an

eloquence that would banish from her mind forever her suspicion and distrust.

And after that he had visioned a ripening romance with this soft-voiced, womanly girl. But now he morosely berated himself as a fool. He might, perhaps, convince her that he was innocent of her brother's death, though cold common sense warned him that this likely would not be as easy as he had visioned. But, as for romance. . . . He remembered his own garb, made of the tanned skins of wild animals, shrunken, faded and tattered, and contrasted it with Jackson Hatcher's fine apparel.

Hatcher had the education of a gentleman, and he dressed the part. Mary Tremaine was a gentle-bred girl. To her, Zack realized, he must appear savage and alien. Hatcher was the type of man she would eventually marry.

The zest was gone from Zack's mind now, nevertheless he meant to recover the gold, and he owed it to himself to plead his case with the girl.

Zack wormed his way beneath the long reach of the Carver wagon, and to the canvas wall of the shelter where Mary Tremaine slept. Cautiously he ran a finger nail against the tarpaulin. The sound gained the girl's attention, for he heard her movements stop suddenly as she listened.

"Miss Tremaine," Zack murmured.

THERE was the sharp sound of an indrawn breath, and he knew that she had recognized his voice. She made no outcry.

She hesitated an instant, and then her shadow moved close to the canvas barrier. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

Zack could think of only one thing to say. "I didn't kill your brother," he breathed desperately. "Tom an' me was pardners. He was my friend. You've *got* to believe me!"

Mary Tremaine knelt, lifted the bottom of the tarpaulin, and Zack was looking into her eyes as she crouched there on her knees, peering out. She was at only arm's length and he could see the quick rise and fall of her bosom. Her eyes were wide and, he discovered, an amazingly beautiful deep, dark brown. He had imagined all day that they were dark blue.

"You risked crawling into this camp to—to tell me that again?" she questioned wonderingly.

Zack nodded. "I sorta got proud last night when you wouldn't believe me," he admitted humbly. "I hated to let you go back to the settlements thinkin' anything like that about me. So I trailed the caravan today, hopin' to get a chance to talk to you."

She was silent a moment. "I talked it over with Father Mercy last night after you left the fort," she said. "He pleaded your case for you. If I did you an injustice, I'm sorry."

Zack's heart leaped. "Then you believe me?" he demanded.

Again she hesitated. "Father Mercy seems to think you wouldn't commit murder," she compromised. "I'm sorry if I caused you to take a chance like this. If you were discovered by Mr. Hatcher or any of his *partisans,* there might be serious trouble for you. I've been told that he even offered a reward to any of his men who captured you in the Yellowstone region. He's promised to hang you if you're caught again. He's convinced that you're guilty."

"To hell with Hatcher," Zack growled, the mention of the trader's name reminding him of his ruined air castles.

It was on his tongue to tell her of the gold that was hidden in Hatcher's wagon. Then he decided against it. Half of that dust rightfully belonged to her, but he had no way of proving that it was the same dust that Teton Lusk had stolen that night in the Blackfoot country. Hatcher would

of course scornfully deny it, and claim that the gold was his own; and there was only Zack's word against the trader's.

The sign was not right for mentioning the gold. That could wait for settlement later. There was another matter of more immediate importance on his mind.

"Where does Hatcher think he's pilotin' this outfit?" he asked. "Do you people know that if you keep headin' west you'll wind up in devil's nest of cedar brakes an' coulees? It's a badlands off thataway, an' a real one."

"Badlands? Why, Mr. Hatcher said we'd soon have easy traveling."

Zack's brows pinched together. "There's no open country inside of a hundred miles in that direction. Hatcher must have got his routes mixed up."

THE girl looked worried. "Long John Carver complained about how hard the trail was," she admitted, "but Mr. Hatcher said we'd be out of the worst of it by tomorrow afternoon. He ought to know. He's lived in this region for years."

Zack was nonplussed. "I've hunted that country to the west," he argued. "Even a pack mule has tough goin' in those hills, let alone a flock o' five-ton wagons. . . . If I were you, I'd talk Long John into sendin' a couple of men ahead on horseback before goin' farther ahead," Zack urged. "It'll save you people misery. There's a better route south of here."

Footsteps approached the shelter. Long John's wife was returning.

"I'll talk to Long John," the girl murmured hurriedly. "You must go now. And be careful. Don't risk coming into camp again. Mr. Hatcher has three tough-looking half-breeds handling his wagons. They're always prowling around. They might discover you and start trouble."

She dropped the canvas barrier then, and turned away an instant before the wagon leader's wife entered.

Zack retreated silently, worming his way backwards, crab-fashion from beneath the wagon. Emerging into the moonlight, he veered around, aiming to creep away through the grass and brush to safety.

But a shadowy figure came leaping from the shadows of another wagon nearby. *"Sacré!"*

It was the big, sinewy Jacques Chambeau. And he dove upon Zack like an avalanche.

Zack had time only to partly raise to a knee to meet that attack. He saw the glint of a knife in Chambeau's hands, and he did not have time to draw his own six-shooter.

He threw his body aside as Chambeau plunged upon him, driving out with both legs at the same instant. He felt the man's blade rip through the sleeve of his hunting shirt and pink his flesh. His moccasins drove into the breed's solar plexus, and he leaped to his feet.

Chambeau was hurled a yard away and a wheeze of agony came from his lips. In spite of the paralyzing pain that assailed him, the breed rolled, caught Zack by an ankle. Zack was arising, but he tripped and hit the earth with a crash.

Chambeau lifted a yell for help, and tried to bring his knife into play again, but Zack caught his wrist, holding the blade away. He smashed his fist twice into Chambeau's face.

The uproar aroused the camp. A flood of men, led by Long John Carver and Jackson Hatcher, came racing among the wagons. They leaped upon Zack, dragging him away from Chambeau and pinning his arms at his sides.

Chambeau leaped to his feet, and lifted the knife to plunge it into Zack's chest, but Long John Carver caught the man's arm, and wrested the blade away.

"It ain't exactly my idea o' fair play to carve a helpless man," Long John snapped. "Stand back!"

CHAPTER SIX

Wagon-Train Prisoner

ZACK was disarmed and led into the firelit wagon circle. Jackson Hatcher stepped forward. "I regret, friend Carver," the trader said, "that you interfered with Jacques, even though I deplore bloodshed. It would have spared me the distasteful duty of ordering this fellow strung up. You recognize him, I presume."

Zack's mouth tightened. "You seem mighty anxious to finish me, Hatcher," he said. "What's your authority for sentencin' me to the noose, an' what's the charge against me?"

"The charge is murder," Hatcher snapped. "The murder of Tom Tremaine and Teton Lusk. I gave you your chance to leave this country peacefully, out of deference to the wishes of Father Mercy, who doesn't know you as well as I. Instead, you come skulking into this camp, no doubt to kill and rob other innocent men, as you did Tremaine and Lusk."

"You're wrong," Mary Tremaine spoke breathlessly as she pushed through the circle to Hatcher's side. "Mr. Kildeer came here tonight to—to speak to me. He was leaving when he encountered Chambeau. There was no harm done."

Hatcher stared. "To speak to you?" he echoed. "I don't follow you, my dear. Why, this scoundrel killed your own brother! Surely you're not defending him now."

She glanced at Zack. "I—I doubt that he killed Tom," she said. "In fact, I'm almost sure he didn't."

"Bosh," Hatcher exploded. "This fellow has a knack for winning sympathy, at least. Why did he come here to speak to you?"

"He seems to think you have made a

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mistake in picking this route," she said. "He claims the country ahead is too rough for wagons."

Hatcher yelled derisively. "Why, the infernal impudence of the scoundrel. Surely you don't place any stock in his opinion as against mine, my dear."

He whirled in a rage on Zack. "What's your scheme, Kildeer? Why are you trying to instill a doubt in this young lady's mind? I imagine I can guess. You want to injure me, destroy their confidence in me. A petty method of revenge for the grudge you hold against me, I must say."

"Hatcher, you know as well as I do what you're gettin' into if you keep travelin' west," Zack snapped. "Another day will bring you smack up against the worst stretch of badlands in the West."

Hatcher raged, "Are you trying to tell me that I don't know my business as a guide?"

"Hold on a minute, Hatcher," Long John Carver spoke, tugging thoughtfully at his beard. "I ain't so sure but what there ain't some truth in what Kildeer's a-tellin' us. This country got rougher every mile we traveled since we turned off the main trail."

"Of course," Hatcher snapped. "But it'll open up soon."

"Are you plumb sure?" Carver questioned dubiously. "I climbed thet ridge off to the south at sundown after we had camped, an' took a look ahead. It's rough country off to the west. I could see yaller buttes shinin' in the sun, an' stretches of thick timber an' shale slides. A badlands —no question about it!"

"Certainly it's a badlands," Hatcher said, speaking as he would to a child. "But there's an easy trail through it. I probably didn't make myself clear when I spoke of open country ahead. I meant open in comparison to what we've been through this afternoon. Open for wagons, and much easier traveling."

"If wagons cross that malpais, they'll need wings," Zack spoke cynically. "You are either drunk or crazy, Hatcher. I've hunted through that country. It's tough goin', you hear me."

MARY TREMAINE spoke, voicing the suggestion that Zack had put in her mind a few minutes earlier. "Perhaps it would be a wise idea to scout the trail ahead on horseback before going much farther in this direction with the wagons tomorrow."

"You doubt my word!" Hatcher said, injured.

"Of course not," Long John put in placatingly. "But any man kin make a mistake, Hatcher. Miss Tremaine's idea looks like a good one to me. Can't do no harm to make sure o' our route. Come daybreak, me'n one of the boys will saddle up an' ride ahead to git the lay of the land. The wagon's kin shove along behind us, so no time will be lost. It won't take more'n a few hours to blaze the trail an' know what we're gittin' into."

There was a general nodding of heads among the wagon men. Hatcher framed a withering protest, and then spread his hands in an indifferent gesture. "Certainly," he nodded. "If it will ease your minds, I say to scout the trail by all means. Though I'll have the laugh on you, Carver, and you'll have nothing but saddle blisters for your pains."

Hatcher turned, beckoned to Jacques Chambeau and his two half-Indian swampers. "Take our skulking renegade," he said casually, "out into the timber."

Mary Tremaine uttered a cry of protest. Long John Carver moved to bar the three *engages* who came gliding up with the intention of taking charge of the prisoner.

"Hold on, Hatcher," Long John said, his voice hardening a trifle. "I reckon we all know what you mean. Aren't you bein' a leetle harsh? There's no call to hang Kildeer—not yet."

"What?" Hatcher raged. "Aren't two murders enough? Do you expect me to turn him loose again, so that he can drive a knife into my back some day? That was his intention in creeping into this camp tonight. You can bank on that! I know this varmint!"

"Miss Tremaine ain't convinced that Kildeer murdered her brother," Carver argued. "Bein' as she's next of kin, her word ought to carry most weight. As for Teton Lusk's death, that was a fair fight. And the law says to give a man the benefit of the doubt!"

Long John was a purposeful, solid-tempered man, with a mind of his own. Hatcher, white with resentment at the way his authority was being over-ruled, was too shrewd to attempt to buck the will of the wagon-captain.

He again acknowledged defeat but moved swiftly to salvage a semblance of victory. "You're letting sympathy cloud your common sense, Carver," he criticized. "Out of deference to you I'll again be lenient with this scoundrel. However, I insist that he be kept a prisoner until we reach Fort Laramie, where I'll turn him over to the federal authorities and place all the facts at their disposal. I'd never feel safe if I knew that he was free, waiting to ambush me somewhere along the trail."

Carver nodded. "Cain't blame you for that, Hatcher," he agreed. He looked at Zack. "We'll take you along with us, Kildeer, as a prisoner. Tie him up, boys. We'll have to put a guard over him day an' night until we git to Laramie. I reckon Hatcher knows what he's talkin' about, or he wouldn't be so danged positive about him."

Zack offered no resistance as two wagon-men lashed his arms to his sides. He glanced at Mary Tremaine, who was watching, pale and troubled looking, from the background. His last glimpse of her, before he was led away, was of Hatcher moving toward her, evidently to offer his arm, but she turned suddenly and hurried away to the sleeping shelter.

HATCHER stared after her, a glint of resentment in his eyes. Then he strolled on through the camp to his own wagon. Jacques Chambeau, nursing a swollen eye, and with two teeth missing as a result of his encounter with Zack, was waiting there. Hatcher drew the breed away into the shadows, there to discuss plans for the ambush.

"Kildeer came within an ace of spilling the beans," the trader whispered. "I've got to change the plan a trifle. Sneak out of camp as soon as the coast is clear, Jacques. Ride fast to Ears-Of-The-Fox's camp. Strawn told me they'd camp below that big needle butte that stands up like a thumb on the edge of the badlands. You won't have any trouble locating it on a moonlight night.

"Tell Strawn what's happened. Have him hit the trail with the Indians at once. They've got to be near us by daybreak. Tell them to take care of Carver and whoever else rides ahead to scout the trail. Then they can wait until the wagons come up and lay their ambush.

"Tell Ears-Of-The-Fox there are ten kegs of whiskey in my wagon, and a hundred of these new repeating rifles with plenty of ammunition as an additional gift for him. I'll pretend a breakdown when they stretch out on the trail, and fall behind so that my wagon won't be involved in the fight. Also tell Strawn and the chief that the brown-eyed girl belongs to me. Don't let anyone see you leave the camp, and be back before daybreak somehow."

A few minutes later, Chambeau faded out of the wagon camp, and wormed his way into the timber where he had left a saddle horse for use in just such an emergency. It wouldn't be well for him to be seen leaving.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Into the Trap!

LONG JOHN CARVER singled out two men from his party, and invested them with the responsibility of guarding Zack. "See that he don't get away," he warned.

Zack's custodians followed orders. One was a gangling, stoop-shouldered old prospector who went by the name of Cracker Bill Beamis. The other, a typical, knotty-jawed, bandy-legged wagon swamper, was called Gee-Haw.

They led him away to their wagon and broke out buffalo robes which they spread for him. They wrangled garrulously as to which one must stay awake on the first guard trick, and then tossed a coin. Gee-Haw lost the toss, and grumbled behind his mustache.

"You're costin' us plenty o' sleep, feller," he complained to Zack.

"I'll see that you stay awake tonight, mule-skinner," Zack promised. "Keep that fire burnin' bright, and keep your eyes peeled in case Jacques Chambeau comes prowlin' around. I haven't forgot what happened to Teton Lusk back at Hatcher's trading post."

They eyed him curiously. "You tryin' to tell us that Chambeau killed Teton Lusk back there at the fort?" Cracker Bill scoffed. "You're only pullin' the long bow, ain't you? I reckon you snuffed Lusk's wick for him, all right."

"By grab, I wouldn't put it past the breed, at that," Gee-Haw ruminated, more for the sake of argument. "He's got snake eyes. I'll guard you, mister, from any knife-throwin' half-breeds, an' to see that you don't wiggle out'n our fingers at the same time."

They spread their blankets on either side of Zack. As an added precaution they linked themselves to him by short lengths of rawhide, tied to their ankles.

Drowsy silence settled over the camp. Men, exhausted from the hard day's exertions on the trail, began to snore beneath the wagons. Soon Cracker Bill fell asleep, adding his snoring to the chorus. Gee-Haw, disgusted with his partner's noisy display, kicked him rudely into wakefulness.

"Flop over off'n your back, you old vinegaroon," he snarled. "You make more racket than a rock-crusher."

Cracker Bill stirred and began sawing away again. Gee-Haw shook his head in doleful resignation, and puffed a black clay pipe that emitted an aroma like burning leather. He yawned and occasionally tossed more fuel on the nearby fire as the night became uncomfortably cool.

ZACK closed his eyes and pretended to fall asleep. Deep in his heart he felt he would never live to reach Fort Laramie if he remained a prisoner with this wagon train. Hatcher would see to that. The gold dust mixed into that sack of grain was reason enough for the trader's determination to put him out of the way.

"Hatcher likely suspects that I've scented the gold," Zack reflected. "He don't aim to be accused of bein' a thief. It'd ruin his rep as an honest trader, an' it'd finish him with the girl."

Zack worked at his bonds each time Gee-Haw's attention was diverted. Braided rawhide thongs had been used in tying his arms. The rawhide was tough and unyielding. The bonds were maddeningly resistant to his stealthy efforts.

The wagon fires dwindled to wind-fanned embers. Only the one that Gee-Haw replenished at intervals cast flickering light against the towering flanks of the wagons.

As the moon sailed higher, Gee-Haw's eyes grew heavier. Occasionally his head jerked as sleep nudged at him, then he aroused and tamped fresh tobacco in his

pipe, puffing furiously to stay awake, cursing the slow passage of time.

While Zack strained at his bonds at every opportunity, a faint hope began to flicker in his mind. He had a hunch that the thongs were at last beginning to give a trifle. But it was perhaps only imagination. He increased his efforts, flexing his muscles, putting pressure on the bonds. But progress was maddeningly slow and the guard might see him.

Midnight came, and the stock guard was changed. Gee-Haw, who had been dozing for the past hour, joyfully aroused Cracker Bill. "Wake up, yuh old devil," he said. "An' listen to me snore fer awhile. You been grindin' away steady for four hours."

Gee-Haw rolled into his blankets as he spoke, and was asleep within seconds. Old Cracker Bill groaned and flapped his arms and rubbed his legs. The crisp chill of the high country had invaded his rheumy joints and he sat, half-drugged by his broken slumber, swearing at Zack for causing this trouble.

An hour passed and Cracker Bill's intervals of wakefulness became farther and farther apart, until at last his head slumped and sleep claimed him completely.

Zack fought his bonds with desperate haste now. They were loosening. There was no doubt about it now.

Zack wrested an arm free, and the bonds fell loose. He freed his other arm, sat up stiffly, and then bent cautiously forward. Cracker Bill carried a sheath knife in his boot top, and Zack drew it slowly forth. Two strokes with the whetted edge parted the thongs that hobbled him to his sleeping guards.

Silently Zack slid out of the buffalo robes, and wormed away beneath the wagon. He crept through the grass and brush away from camp while Cracker Bill slept on, oblivious of his failure as a sentinel.

REACHING the deep shadows of the timber Zack got to his feet and set off at a jog to locate his pony. He had covered half the distance to the point where he had left his animal when he suddenly halted, and crouched down in darkness beneath a clump of scrub cedar.

The increasing sound of galloping hoofs sounded in the moon-dappled timber. Then the big, capote-clad figure of Jacques Chambeau appeared in the moonlight nearby.

Chambeau dismounted in a small grass clearing not twenty yards from where Zack was hunkered. Zack heard the hard, exhausted snuffling of the horse and saw sweat vapor rising from the lathered animal in the frosty moonlight. The breed picketed the spent horse, and turned to make his way on foot toward the wagon camp. His course carried him within two yards of where Zack lay in concealment.

The urge to leap out and settle with this renegade who had twice attempted to murder him raced through Zack's fibers. His muscles tightened and he gathered himself. Then he became suddenly motionless again.

For the second time within two days he had caught the alien smoky tang of an Indian in the night air. Fainter, more elusive than that given off by Simon Strawn the previous night, but nonetheless unmistakable. This time it came from Jacques Chambeau's colorful attire.

Zack remained rigid while the breed passed on out of reach. He watched the man emerge stealthily into the clearing and start creeping toward the wagon camp. It was obvious that Chambeau wanted no one to know that he had been absent during the night.

Slowly, and then with a wild surge, the vague, formless suspicions that had been gathering in Zack's mind suddenly crystallized into a concrete theory—a theory so horrible that it sent a freezing wave through his veins.

Jacques Chambeau had been in close contact with Indians during his secret absence from the wagon camp. The odor of a close-packed council meeting still clung to his garb!

For motionless moments Zack remained there, thinking over the events of the past thirty-six hours, sorting each clew and fact, interpreting and rearranging them in a new sequence.

There was Teton Lusk's death as the man was on the point of making some sort of a confession; Simon Strawn's secret visit at Hatcher's Fort; Hatcher volunteering to guide the caravan, and leading them instead into this wild, off-trail region which was ideal for a secret massacre.

"An' I thought it was only that little dab o' gold in the grain sacks Hatcher was after," Zack murmured hoarsely. "Jupiter! I must still be wrong. No white man would. . . ."

He turned, raced away and found his horse. He had to make sure.

SADDLING up, he rode away through the timber. Dawn was at hand now. The brush and boulders began to take form in misty gray pallor. Below lay the winding draw that the caravan must follow when it pushed ahead westward.

He had gone little more than a mile, and daylight was strengthening, when he pulled his pony suddenly back into deeper cover. Peering through the foliage, a slow boil of anger and horror arose in him again.

From his vantage point he had a view of the draw where it angled abruptly around the toe of a hogback ridge. The silvery thread of a creek showed here and there in the notch. But in that half-light before sunrise a phantom-like straggle of riders showed briefly as they forded the stream.

They were Indians, muffled in robes and blankets as protection from the early morning chill, but he saw the glint of eagle feather and warpaint. He estimated their numbers at three score or more.

The riders were silhouetted against the bright sheen of the stream, and then the forest swallowed them again. Zack waited minute after minute, but the Indians did not reappear. They had halted there in the deep timber.

Zack retreated, putting a ridge between himself and the war party. He turned, and sighted two riders jogging down the draw from the east. It was Long John Carver and a young wagon man, riding ahead to blaze the trail.

The course they were following would take them around the toe of the ridge, and into the midst of the war party at the ford—to certain death!

Zack left his horse, and raced down the slant on foot to intercept them. Long John Carver made a sudden move toward his six-shooter as Zack appeared from the brush. He drew the gun, and held it ready as Zack ran forward.

"Quick," Zack snapped. "Haul off the trail. Get into cover. There's a war party laying a trap for your wagons half a mile ahead around the bend."

He caught the bridles, dragging their animals back into concealment beneath overhanging cedar boughs. Then swiftly he told them what he knew.

Long John Carver blinked, and his bearded jaws grew hard and gaunt. "You are loco, Kildeer," he growled. "Why would Hatcher rig up a trap to murder innocent people?"

"You men came from the gold country, didn't you," Zack snapped. "The chances are some of you carry dust in your wagons. Hatcher likely knows it."

Long John straightened in dismay. Hidden in his own wagon was a modest fortune in gold. He also knew that at least three other parties in the caravan had hit it rich in the diggings.

Final, clinching proof came in the next

instant. Zack made a sudden gesture for silence. He pointed, and they glimpsed a shadowy figure moving on foot through the brush, high on the opposite flank of the draw—an Indian, daubed with war paint. The Sioux was working his way up the draw, peering cautiously.

"A scout, sent to locate your outfit," Zack murmured. "Don't move. He ain't sighted us."

They waited tensely for ten minutes, and then saw the scout return and vanish around the curve of the draw.

"How near are your wagons?" Zack demanded.

"Can't be far behind us," Long John said, and his voice was hollow. "They was ready to stretch out when me'n Bob rode ahead to study the trail. They're followin' this gulch."

"The Sioux must have sighted them an' is hot-footin' it back to tell 'em to get ready for the scalpin'-bee," Zack said.

Long John was on the brink of panic. "Good God!" he muttered hoarsely. "You called the turn, Kildeer. Hatcher's double-decked us." He aroused frenziedly. "We got to turn the wagons back," he panted, "an' get out of this hellish trap! I'll kill Hatcher with my own hands. Damn him, he—"

Zack leaped on the horse behind him. "Keep your head, Carver," he ordered. "You can't get out of this now without a fight. No use tryin'. The Indians know you're here. They'd only follow you and swarm down on you before you could retreat a mile. The advantage would be all on their side, in these hills an' brush."

"What else kin we do?" Carver groaned.

"Put the boot on the other hoof," Zack snapped. "In place of millin' around like a flock of sheep, lay a deadfall for the Injuns. You've got to whip this bunch of braves or they'll tail you all the way to Laramie, dealin' misery from every ambush they can find.

"The Sioux don't know yet that you're onto their scheme. They'll be too sure of their quarry. Give 'em a dose of their own medicine. Make forts of your wagons. Barricade the baggage an' fix loopholes. Have every gun loaded an' ready. Tell every man—an' woman—to be all set to fight for their lives!

"Then trail ahead into this trap just as if you didn't know what was comin'. When the braves jump us, they'll find themselves grabbin' the hot end of a poker. They outnumber you near three to one, but that ain't such bad odds. Come on!"

Long John's eyes began to shine. "How 'bout Hatcher?" he demanded grimly.

"I'll take care of Hatcher, personal!" Zack promised.

They kicked their ponies ahead, racing up the draw.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bushwhack Showdown

ROUNDING a turn, they came upon the lead wagon in the lumbering line of vehicles that were snailing through the winding brushy defile.

Carver's wagon led the way as usual, with a volunteer from another wagon handling the mules during Carver's absence. Long John's wife poked her bonneted head over the bow as they rode up.

"Where's Hatcher?" Long John demanded.

His wife stared, terrified by the expression on her husband's face. "Why, goodness me!" she gasped. "What's wrong? Mr. Hatcher's wagon needed some repairs, an' he throwed off the trail aways back. He allowed he'd ketch up with us later on."

Zack glared around. "Where's Miss Tremaine?" he demanded.

"My lands! You've got me all flustered. Mr. Hatcher has been so nice to her thet she stayed to keep him company."

"Get five or six men, with guns," Zack barked at Long John. "And get me a gun too. Hatcher faked that breakdown so he could watch the show."

Carver summoned five husky wagon-men and swiftly told what was in the wind.

A wave of panic swept through the party, but Zack gave them no time to think. "Rig your wagons to stand an attack. Pile your baggage an' grub boxes as a barricade against arrows an' bullets. Fix loopholes. Take a grip on yourselves. You can win this fight, if you do exactly what I say."

He motioned the squad Carver had summoned and led them on up the draw. Pushing through the brush they came suddenly upon Hatcher's gleaming, white-topped Pittsburgh wagon drawn up in the shade of towering cedars. Chambeau and his two swampers had a wheel jacked up and were indolently pretending to be making repairs. Mary Tremaine sat on a deadfall nearby, with Hatcher standing by, smiling down at her.

Hatcher and the breeds turned as the party came crashing out of the brush. Hatcher's thin face went taut as he saw Zack. He backed away a pace.

But Zack's gun was in his hand. "Lift 'em!" he snapped, and his men covered Hatcher's party.

Long John Carver strode forward in a rage and drove his fist into Jackson Hatcher's face, knocking him down. "You murderous devil!" he raged. He would have killed Hatcher then and there, but Zack dragged him back.

"That'd be too easy for him, Carver," Zack said. He looked around. Chambeau and the two wagon swampers were cowering, with the guns of wagon-men jammed into their ribs.

"Tie 'em up," Zack ordered. "Stuff gags in their mouths an' throw 'em into their own wagon. Slap mud an' dirt on that nice new tilt an' daub up the paint on the wheels so that wagon will look like it came all the way from Idaho."

"What's on your mind, Kildeer?" Long John asked.

ZACK grinned mirthlessly. "Hatcher planned this ambush. He was willin' to let you people go blindly into a trap. It's only right that he learns how it feels to hear bullets an' arrows whizzin' past his ears. We'll let Hatcher's wagon lead the way into this ambush, an' Hatcher will be ridin' inside along with his pals."

He turned and looked icily at Mary Tremaine. "I'm right sorry that I've got to put your admirer in such danger."

The girl straightened as though he had hit her with a whip. A sudden rush of fury stained her cheeks. "You—you insulting ingrate," she exploded. "I stayed with him this morning only to keep an eye on him. I've grown suspicious of him myself. I didn't believe his wagon had broken down. I wanted to see what he was up to. You—you can think what you please!"

She whirled, turning her back on Zack.

Long John chuckled. "You got clawed that time, Kildeer," he commented. "Looks like you better try to smooth her down, for what she said is the truth. She hinted to me this mornin' that Hatcher might need watchin'. Fact is, she come right out an' said that she was mighty glad you had give us the slip last night, an' she only hoped you'd have sense enough to stay clear of us. She called me a fool and a lunkhead for makin' a prisoner of you."

Zack looked at the girl in sudden abject humbleness, but with a swish of her skirt she hurried scornfully away.

There was a sinking feeling in Zack's stomach, as though he was seeing something precious slip forever out of his hands.

He turned wearily. "Get busy," he said hoarsely.

Hatcher began to rave and curse Zack, but Long John Carver jammed a gag in his mouth, and tossed him into his wagon alongside his three *partisans.*

Zack investigated the contents of the wagon. "Whiskey," he commented, revealing a row of liquor kegs. "An' plenty of guns and ammunition. A gift to the Indians for their part in this deviltry, I reckon. Look—these guns are new repeatin' Winchesters. Not even the Army has got repeaters. We can use these smoke-poles ourselves this mornin'. An' maybe the whiskey later, if we feel like celebratin'!"

THE sun was rimming the shaggy, pine-crested ridges as the caravan lumbered onward toward the creek ford where Zack had sighted the Indians. Except that the formation was a trifle more compact, with the wagons close together, and with the bulk of the party apparently taking advantage of the chance to ride inside instead of walking, the formation seemed normal.

Only a few mule-skinners and swampers were visible. Zack was mounted on the off mule of the wheel team, handling the lead wagon. The vehicle appeared as mud-stained as its companions. Inside Jackson Hatcher and his three p*artisans* fought their bonds, breathing heavily back of their gags.

Zack had borrowed a linsey shirt and woolen breeches to cover his buckskins. His eyes were wary beneath the rim of a battered hat as he scanned the ford. It was an ideal place for an ambush. Beyond the creek a hill pitched abruptly upward, its flank matted with brush and boulders. A thousand Indians could have found concealment there.

Zack hiked the mule team into the shallow ford, and the wagon lurched heavily as its wheels ground over boulders.

Then Zack saw a boil of movement break out in the opposite brush. With a yell, he dropped to the off-side of the team, jerked the animals back, slacking the trace chains. He ducked beneath the off-mule's belly, and unhooked the animals from the wagon with quick, swift motions. At the same instant other drivers and swampers, according to pre-arranged instructions, were releasing the teams from wagons.

The attack came then like the sudden onslaught of a storm. The rocks and brush across the creek spewed a howling, painted horde of frenzied warriors.

RIFLE fire rippled, sending clashing echoes rebounding through the hills. Bullets ripped through wagon tops and thudded into the barricades that had been erected inside to protect the defenders. A few mules went down under that first volley, but the remainder stampeded wildly away out of danger.

The Indians came out of cover in a

howling flood. They swept toward the wagons in a ragged line, firing and screaming.

They were certain their surprise was complete and paralyzing. They were within fifty yards of the stalled wagons when they learned their error.

A sheet of rifle flame danced along the line of wagons. A storm of lead tore through the ranks of the Indians, scything jagged gaps in their formation. Savages went down, their war whoop changing to a rattling screech of agony. Painted bodies piled up; live Indians tripping over fallen comrades, dying even as they stumbled.

That flaming gust of death from the wagons continued in a brazen crescendo, as though some mad organist has pulled all the stops on his instrument in a crescendo of hell's own music. The repeating rifles that Zack had found in Jackson Hatcher's wagon were in action.

Zack dove for cover into Hatcher's wagon the instant he freed the mules. He snatched up a rifle and joined that sustained chorus of gunfire. In the stress of the moment, seconds passed before he realized that a second gun was in action almost at his side. He had believed that he was alone, except for Hatcher and the three breeds who lay bound and helpless at his feet.

He glanced up. Mary Tremaine was kneeling within arm's reach of him, using a rifle, working the bolt coolly. As he stared, startled, her gun went empty, and she seized up another, and peered for a target.

An arrow ripped through the canvas, brushing her hair, passing on through the opposite side of the tilt with an eerie twang.

Zack snatched the girl away, pushing her down back of the solid barricade of provisions. "How did you get here?" he panted. "You were supposed to stay in Carver's wagon at the end of the line."

"I liked this one better," she flashed. "I climbed into it while you were busy driving the team."

Zack swore in anxiety. Half of the Indians who had burst from cover had gone down, but the remainder, frenzied by scalp-lust, were upon the wagons now.

Because the lead wagon was nearer and more exposed, a dozen painted Sioux swarmed around it, clawing for entrance. Zack leaped to the bow, and sent a bullet into the brain of a painted warrior that appeared at the opening. An arrow, fired by a Sioux standing on the ground, tore through the muscles of his left upper arm. The force of it whirled him around.

He reeled, fired at the warrior and missed. The savage leaped, caught the wagon bow, and reared up, a tomahawk lifted, to brain Zack.

Mary Tremaine's rifle exploded, the flash scorching Zack's cheek. The bullet tore through the Indian's chest, hurling him back. He hit the ground spread-eagled, writhing in his death throes. Zack steadied himself, and fired twice, clearing the rear bow of the wagon of another painted figure.

That was the crest of the assault. As quickly as it had come, its fury faded, and the survivors turned to escape.

AS ZACK braced himself in the wagon bow, and broke off the dangling shaft of the arrow which impeded his movements, he saw a scant handful of warriors darting for the brush, their bravado gone, fear glazing their eyes.

Among them he sighted a lumbering, paunchy figure, naked to the waist and wearing Sioux warpaint. But this man was no Indian. He was the renegade, Simon Strawn.

Zack lifted his rifle, followed his target as he would lead a deer, and pulled the trigger. He killed Simon Strawn as remorselessly as he would have clipped the head from a rattlesnake, and watched without emotion as the renegade's body

went tumbling in its lifeless, macabre somersault.

Zack lowered his gun, and the girl put an arm around him, steadying him, while the rest of the wagon men gave chase to the renegade savages. He explored his wounded arm, and extracted the barb which jutted from the flesh. He stood stanching the wound with his hand, then turned and kicked a grainsack with the toe of his moccasin. "The gold that Teton Lusk stole from Tom an' me is in that bag," he muttered hoarsely. "Half o' it belongs to you, like I said."

Long John and other men came clambering into the wagon. "That pack of devils won't bother us no more," Carver boomed. "There wasn't a score of 'em that got away. Kildeer, do you reckon we kin find our way out of this cussed country? Maybe we better turn back to Hatcher's Fort an' wait till spring. . . ."

"I reckon I can lead you to Laramie," Zack said. "There's a cut-off south of here that we likely can slip through without meetin' any more Indians. An' I reckon after what happened here the Sioux won't be any too anxious to tangle with this outfit." He paused. "I'll pilot you, if you want to trust me."

It was Mary Tremaine who spoke. "We'll trust you," she said breathlessly. Then her eyes wavered, and her cheeks flamed.

Carver spoke gruffly to his companions. "Bring these carrion along, boys," he said, indicating the prisoners. "We'll take 'em out in the timber."

Zack knew where Jackson Hatcher and his allies were going. He could see wagon men, now returned, waiting outside with hang-ropes in their hands.

Zack turned the girl away so that she could not see or recognize the purpose of the wagon-men, as they led the four prisoners into the timber.

She looked at his streaming arm, and pulled a scarf from around her neck, and tied it around the wound. "I'll get water and take care of it."

"That can wait a minute," Zack said. "It ain't serious." He looked at her morosely. "I shouldn't have said what I did about—about you an' Hatcher," he mumbled humbly.

"I should think not!" she returned briskly. "You ought to be ashamed."

"I am," Zack declared fervently. "I don't want you to hold that ag'in me. But it made me plumb mad to see that dude smilin' at you and kissin' your hand."

"Oh," she said. "So you were spying on me even then? You seem to have taken quite an interest in my welfare."

Zack was sweating. He was miserable. He removed his hat. "I didn't mean to spy or nib in," he stammered. "I won't bother you any more, Miss Tremaine." He turned to leave the wagon. He was panting, shaken to the core. Defeated.

"Where are you going?" the girl flashed. Then she caught his good arm, her grip fierce and angry. "You—you stupid dunce!" she exploded. "Don't you know anything about how to handle a girl? Do I have to get down on my knees and admit that I was wrong?"

Zack stared at her dazedly, saw in her eyes the bright promise that he had visioned in his daydreams. He saw his air castles suddenly assemble themselves again.

Mary Tremaine's eyes dropped. Zack had one more question. "Are you promised to any—to any man?"

She shook her head. "Not yet."

Zack laughed then, the sound rolling grandly. "You are now," he stated. "An' I reckon I'll start right quick learnin' about how to handle a girl."

"I'm a good teacher," she smiled, as Zack's arm went around her. "And, anyhow, I don't expect to have any trouble with my star pupil!"

THE END

• • • Two-Bits Studies

In the blizzard, men loomed to the right and left of him; cows floundered and plunged. . . .

By Wes Fargo

What did the broken Bighorn cow-folks care for a bright range future, when their herds were starving and the lash of winter storms could bring only ruin and death? But Johnny Poe and Two-Bits figured Ace Kinney and his greedy gun-crew could furnish that desperately needed feed, and—lacking cold cash —they'd buy it in hot lead!

CHAPTER ONE

A Tough Deal for Honest Ranchers

AS THE close-bunched little cavvy swept around the canyon bend and dipped into sight of the river bed, the red-haired little jingler on the star-

Triggernometry

A "Johnny Poe & Two-Bits" Novel

faced black pony in the drag drew up with a snort of disgust.

"Durn! Jest like them cowpokes at the last town said. . . . dryer'n the Sahary desert!"

Johnny Poe, coming up more leisurely on his gray gelding, slowed and looked at his freckled young partner with a concealed grin. "When was you ever in the Sahary? Or was that what yuh was talkin' over with that Star hoss of yores?"

"You know what I mean!" Two-Bits Connor, so labeled by Johnny because of his small size, tugged his hat down over his freckled face. The hat was identical with Johnny's, and so were the shirt, chaps and

neckerchief. In fact Two-Bits even wore, around his skimpy waist, a sagging gun-belt just like Johnny's, with an old Colt .45 thrust into the holster. "Look at that river bed down there! Not enough water to choke a tick. An' this here Star pony's tongue is already hangin' out a mile!"

"That no 'count bag of bones?" Johnny sniffed. "He ain't worth the water he drinks or the grass he eats. Now if it was a *real* hoss—"

"No 'count? Bag o' bones?" Two-Bits rose in his saddle and his eyes flashed. "Star is the best hoss in this here cavvy —outside, mebbe, o' that gray an' the buckskin—" Then all at once he caught sight of Johnny Poe's twinkling eyes, and relaxed in his saddle. "Aw, shucks!"

Johnny Poe chuckled. "Mebbe yo're right. Mebbe that Star hoss is some use. He's tryin' plenty plain to get yuh to head him for that water yuh been promisin' him. Why don't yuh?"

"Water?" Two-Bits looked, shook his head. "Where's any water? This here whole river bottom is dry as old cow-hide."

"Hosses have got lots o' sense, if a man will let 'em use it," said Johnny. "More sense than men, sometimes. Star's tryin' to tell yuh this here bed is dry, but there's pools likely, up there where he's signalin'. So le's go find 'em."

He slacked the reins. And the gelding he was riding, turned and swung off up the main canyon, cut by the river, as it had dredged its way down from the distant crests to the left. The other horses followed, lengthening their paces, as their nostrils brought the smell of water.

For two hundred yards and more they trampled the parched bottoms fringing the river bed. Bottoms so hard and brown and dead that they gave the illusion of burning mid-summer, despite the biting autumn wind, that swept down from the distant peaks. Johnny Poe cast a glance at them and at the gray skies above.

"Snow country, big snow country," he muttered. "Coupla weeks, and these bottoms may be a foot deep or mebbe deeper an' no water underneath." Then as they came close upon a jutting granite outcrop he caught sight of growing green beyond, and spoke to Two-Bits. "That Star hoss wasn't lyin'. There, where them trees . . . . *what the hell!*"

SOMETHING had tugged at Johnny's hat, almost jerked it from his head. Something else, like a whip-lash, had hummed and cracked almost at Johnny's ear. Even as he jerked his hand downward, he heard a second crack, glimpsed the puff of smoke blowing from the top of the outcrop. "Down, Two-Bits! Down!" yelled Johnny.

But Two-Bits had likewise glimpsed the smoke. "Dry-gulchers—behind that rock!" he cried. He was tugging at the heavy old Colt in its worn holster. "If I can git a shot at 'em."

At the rifle crack and the acrid powder smell blowing down wind toward them, the cavvy horses had halted, sniffing, uneasy. Seeing that no more bullets followed, and realizing that at that short range no Westerner could have missed except through purpose, Johnny Poe raised his hand again and faced toward the rock. "That's a hell of a welcome to a stranger in a new country!" he announced crisply. "What's the big idee, anyway?"

For an answer there was a clattering of gravel, and from behind the outcrop stepped a gaunt, gray-bearded man in cowman clothes and boots, and with a Winchester cradled in his hand. Behind him came a younger, dark-haired cowpuncher, also rifle in hand, but this rifle was cocked and its muzzle bearing full on Johnny Poe and Two-Bits. "Keep 'em kivered, Spike!" ordered the old cowman, and tramped straight toward Johnny.

Johnny Poe's eyes blinked, but his voice was calm, almost a drawl, as he repeated his question. "What's the big idee?"

"The idee is, the road's closed," snapped the cowman. "This whole range up here is closed. So seein' yuh ain't got no further business here, turn 'round and git!"

"Range closed?" Johnny Poe looked around. "I didn't see no fence."

"She's Winchester fenced, mister, an' she stays fenced!" was the crisp retort. "Fenced agin yuh an' any other cow-thievin' gunman, Ace Kinney sends this way! So yuh can ride right on into Bighorn—yuh can ride right on in to yore boss an' tell him to put that in his pipe an' smoke it!"

Johnny Poe relaxed, smiled. "Reckon yo're barkin' up the wrong tree, mister. Ain't never been in Bighorn, an' never heard of Ace Kinney. Me an' my pardner here is bronc-busters, just headin' through on our way north 'fore the snow flies."

The old man looked at him sharply, then at Two-Bits Connor sitting his star-faced black. "Mebbe—. But I ain't takin' no chances. Ain't no broncs 'round here to bust, noways. Keep ridin'!"

Johnny Poe nodded. "Fur as I'm concerned, it's yore range, Mister Watt. Don't look like to be much fightin' over, noway. Drought's burnt the life outa it. I've seen better range given back to the Injuns."

OLD Bill Watt's shoulders suddenly sagged. His hands shook till the Winchester in them drooped. "It was good country one time—it was a good country 'fore the drought, an' that damn hellion Ace Kinney, hit this range. Now . . . . reckon yo're right, mister."

Johnny Poe's eyes softened with quick sympathy. Here was a man who loved his country . . . . a cowman of the cow country. "Burnt out, now," he added, "but I bet she'd be plenty purty in the Spring. Hard winter comin', with lots o' snow. All that snow-water will grow a lot of grass, come next Spring an' Summer."

"Yeah?" The old cowman's shoulders suddenly straightened, his face tensed, and his voice rasped with anger. "Fur them that can stick it out, yeah, she'll be damn' purty next year. But what about a man with no hay? My cow-critters'll starve, with deep snow an' no hay to spread. . . ."

"I'd think you'd cut yore hay early last Spring, fore the drouth hit," said Johnny. "Yo're cattleman enough to—"

"Cut it? I did cut hay—I had plenty an' to spare! An' Ace Kinney burnt it—burnt every straw an' stack of it! Leastways nobody but a hellion like him—" He choked and stopped.

"I'm sorry, Mister, I'm shore sorry." Johnny Poe shifted uneasily, looked at Two-Bits. "I reckon mebbe we better ride onto Bighorn. Yuh'll be needin' any little water yuh got left."

But oddly enough the old cowman waved him ahead. "Nope, mister. Yuh look honest an' them hosses look thirsty. Never could see a dumb critter go thirsty an' enjoy my own vittles an' drink afterward. Drive 'em on up there, let 'em drink."

Johnny Poe did so, and when they had finished he started them back again. Two-bits was silent, his lips tight.

The old cowman, Watt, was still standing there where they had left him, but the young puncher he had called Spike was no longer in sight.

"Mister," he called, "if yo're honest, yuh'll ride right on past Bighorn an' keep ridin'. Bighorn's a reg'lar Sodom an' Gomorry, an' Ace Kinney is the devil's own brother. He owns, or wants to own, this whole country, just like he owns Bighorn, an' he owns that lock, stock, an' barr'l. Yuh'll be lucky if yuh hang onto them hosses. Nothin' good that ever come to this country, cow-critter or hoss-flesh, ever was safe if Ace Kinney set his eyes on it."

"Much obliged for the word, an' the water." Johnny Poe waved his hand, and slapped the buckskin ahead of him with his doubled rope. "Git along, yuh Buck. Git along. Two-Bits, haze up that damn' paint-hoss. One drink a' water makes that ramblin' barber-pole friskier'n a sheep-herd with a skinful of likker!"

The moment they were out of earshot of the old cowman, however, Two-Bits Connor exploded with the angry words that had been damned up within him. "He shot at us—that old walrus shot at us, an' yuh let 'im!"

"Mebbe yuh didn't see that rifle barrel that black-haired cowpoke was pointin' this way," said Johnny Poe.

Two-Bits gave an exclamation of disgust. "Shucks, yuh coulda' dragged yore iron an' dropped 'im an' covered that old walrus 'fore they knowed yuh was started! I seen yuh move fast too many times."

"That's just it," said Johnny Poe. "That's another lesson for yuh. That old-timer was right, we didn't have no real business up in that hollow. We coulda waited 'till we got to Bighorn. An' a man's a fool that spills blood just outa hot-headedness."

But Two-Bits' freckled face was still sulky with the temper that went with his red hair. "Jest the same, they better not try to smoke me outa no place if I can lay a sight on 'em."

Johnny Poe said nothing, but his lips tightened. He hazed the cavvy along at a faster pace, and kept it up until they clattered into the main street of the little own that was Bighorn, itself.

CHAPTER TWO

Hard Cash Kinney

THE first thing that met their sight, was the Ace-High Saloon and Hotel. Directly across from that was the Ace-High General Store. Even the feed and livery stable had big letters, announcing the Ace-High Stable and Corrals, "Hay and Grain for Sale."

Johnny Poe's eyes blinked. "Old-Timer Watt was shore right when he said Ace Kinney owned everything, lock, stock, and barrel. Leastways I reckon that Ace-High brand is all his."

He headed straight toward the stable, swung from the saddle at the door. To the bleary-eyed stableman who came out he spoke briefly. "We'll be stoppin' till tomorrow. How much for the hosses, includin' oats?"

"Dollar a head." The stableman did not even blink as he set the outrageously high price.

"Dollar a head?" Johnny smiled. "I said 'one night', not a week."

"That's the price—yuh can take it or leave it. There ain't no other place where yuh can buy oats or hay, so I reckon yuh ain't got much choice."

"All right, we're stoppin'. But yuh better not skimp none on the oats." Johnny turned to Two-Bits. "Jerk the pack-saddles an' gear off, an' drag it inside. Then yuh stay here till I git back."

Two-Bits let out a yelp of disappointment. "But I wanta come with yuh. Yuh know—"

"Yo're stayin' here. Since yo're so dead-set on swappin' smoke with fella's, that don't see yore way, I reckon this is the safest place to leave yuh. Hosses is generally dead easy to git on with." And with this pointed rebuke, Johnny Poe swung off up the street, his bright spurs jingling.

The first visit he made was to the store, where he replenished his supply of tobacco and cartridges. Then he angled across the street to the saloon and hotel, to find out the trails through the Blue Peaks to the north, and, especially, possible weather conditions in the high country.

The barkeeper, the walking newspaper of the cow-country, was loquacious, but his information was not highly cheerful. The Blue Peaks were up beyond Twin Valleys, and it was all humped up country up there. Bad country for rustlers and outlaws. Worse still, it was big snow country. Blizzard might be due to hit any day now—in fact, late as it was, and with that wind and sky, the bartender was surprised that it wasn't already knee-deep. And for a man to be snowbound or lost up in that country, it was the same as a death-warrant.

Over at a side table, a desultory game of poker was going on between a thin-faced, white-fingered man in town clothes, evidently the house gambler, and three cowboys. One of the cowboys, a tow-headed, stocky man, with two guns, and addressed by the obvious nickname of Cotton, was evidently a foreman or other person of authority.

Watching them was a handsome man of thirty-five or forty, in cowman's clothing, his face clean-shaven except for a carefully trimmed mustache.

WHILE Johnny was still questioning the bartender, the mustached man walked over to the bar and ordered a drink. Hearing Johnny's question, he turned with an interested look. "Them good looking hosses in the stable corral yore's?"

"Well, I didn't foal 'em but I rode in with 'em an' I got bill-o'-sales for all of 'em, so I reckon we can call 'em mine," said Johnny Poe dryly. There was something a little too handsome about the man's face and mustache—or maybe it was the beady, narrow-set eyes that he didn't like.

But the man only laughed. He held out his hand. "Wasn't meanin' to cast no 'spersions. I'm Ace Kinney. An' I'm always int'rested in pickin' up good horseflesh. Be interested in sellin'?"

"Nope," said Johnny Poe, "I ain't interested."

"Give you a hundred apiece for first pick of three, or five hundred flat for the whole lot outside the pack-hosses."

"I still ain't interested."

"Well, yuh know yore business. But I heard yuh mention the Blue Peaks. Takin' good hosses through there is a big risk. There's fellers up there that won't make yuh no offer—they'll just take 'em an' pay with bullets."

"Reckon they'd be jest as quick to take money as hosses," said Johnny Poe dryly. "I'll take my chances."

Ace Kinney laughed again. "Don't blame you for not wantin' to sell; they're damn good-lookin' hosses. But if yuh change yore mind, just look me up. The offer still stands. Have a drink with me on the house, stranger?"

"Shore, much obleeged," said Johnny Poe.

The poker game broke up, and the gambler and tow-headed puncher drifted over.

"Saw old Bill Watt from the Twin Valleys come in just now with that puncher, Spike," said the tow-head conversationally to Ace. "They was drivin' two hay-wagons. Must be figgurin' on buyin' hay."

"That so?" Ace did not even look around. "Well, if he's got the money he can have it, Cotton. I got that hay an' oats to sell. Anybody can buy it that pays cash an' takes it away."

"Anybody that's got the money!" Cotton laughed. "Watt may not have the cash, but he's got the need, all right. After all, his own hay burned."

At that moment the door opened, and Bill Watt came in. He was alone, Spike evidently having lingered elsewhere. Watt came straight toward the bar and Ace Kinney.

"Kinney," he said, "I need hay an' oats. I *got* to have 'em! Big snow's likely to come any minute, an' I got to

winter-feed. Won't a quarter of my critters come through if I don't. What terms will yuh make?"

"Same terms as always." Kinney fingered his glass carelessly. "You know—cash, an' take it away."

"But I ain't got but a hundred—not near enough to carry me through. An' I can't see dumb critters starve. I got to have winter-feed, I tell yuh. How about addin' it to the mortgage, you know the Box W is worth ten times that present mortgage."

"I'm a fair man, but I ain't in business for my health. I ain't raisin' that mortgage none, nor extendin' it. But I'm willin' to buy you out any time."

"An' that price ain't a third of what the Box W is worth neither, an' yuh know it! If it hadn't been for the drouth an' that burned hay an' them rustled cows, I'd 'a paid yuh off this year an' made money too!"

"But yuh didn't pay me. I didn't tally yore calf crop or yore accounts, so I'm takin' 'em on yore say-so. All I'm askin' is my money back, an' my rightful int'rest."

"Yeah?" The smoldering fire in the old cowman's eyes suddenly burst into blaze. "I said I'd 'a paid yuh if it hadn't been for that burned hay an' them rustled cows. It's damn funny that it's just my hay that burned, just *my* cows that got rustled!"

AT THAT, the tow-headed puncher stepped forward, his eyes narrowed, his hand over his gun butt. "Damn yore hide! Yuh hintin' that we had anything to do with that?"

But Ace Kinney laid one finger on his hand, and spoke one sentence in his quiet voice: "*I'm* attendin' to this, Cotton." And the tow-headed cowboy stumbled back against the bar.

Bill Watt wet his lips. "I said what I said, an' I don't chew tobacco again after I've spit it out. Yuh—" Suddenly he clamped his jaws shut, swung on his heel and went out, the holstered Colt bobbing at his hip as he walked.

Johnny Poe left the second half of his drink unfinished, and went out too, and back to the stable and Two-Bits.

In the lee of the stable wall, Two-Bits was riffling and dealing Johnny Poe's old solitaire deck. Johnny Poe stood moodily, his eyes roaming the street. He saw the Box W puncher Spike come out of the store, borrow a match from the tow-headed puncher Cotton, talk for a few minutes, then cross to the saloon. Johnny Poe's eyes narrowed, shifted thoughtfully to Two-Bits.

Suddenly Johnny Poe caught his breath. Reaching over, he grabbed Two-Bits' wrist. "Where'd yuh learn that?" he shot out crisply.

"That? Oh that's just a new card trick." Two-Bits' finger awkwardly dropped the bottom card which he had been trying to deal with the appearance that it came from the top of the deck. "Fella just showed it to me just now."

"What fella?"

"That dark-haired puncher that was with old Walrus Watt. Name of Spike, wasn't it?" Two-Bits looked at Johnny, puzzled. "Why?"

"Teaching a youngster crookedness, huh? Teachin' 'im to deal off the bottom!" Johnny Poe's eyes were glinting. "Gimme them cards."

As Two-Bits passed them over, still puzzled, Johnny Poe's voice was like brittle ice. "A man's either honest, or he ain't. An' card cheatin's about the lowest form of dishonesty. When yo're growed up, I won't have no say-so as to what you do. But till then I'm goin' to see yuh stay honest, or bust a cinch tryin'. That's the honest side of it. As for the danger side, watch!"

With one flip of the hand, he sent the tight deck high into air. At the very top

of their arc, the cards broke apart.

Johnny Poe's arm scarcely seemed to move. But suddenly it had a gun out, and the gun was roaring. The topmost card leaped, leaped again, spun up and sideways. Three times more it leaped as three more bullets drove through it was the speed almost of an eye wink. Then Johnny Poe was thumbing out the spent cartridges, reloading with fresh.

"It ain't safe to cheat, or to call another man for cheatin', till you can do that an' better. If that Spike fella comes around again, show him that card an' tell him I'll be seein' him. . . . Now pick up yore war-bag; we're goin' to the hotel."

At the hotel Johnny took a room with two beds, and they dumped their bags and went down to supper.

WHEN they had finished their supper, darkness had fallen and Johnny started back to their room. Then he saw Two-Bits' eyes and ears turned longingly toward the brightly lighted saloon, and Johnny relented. After all, Two-Bits hadn't seen any town for weary weeks of riding. It wasn't good for even partners to live like that too long. And in the cow-country a saloon wasn't just a place to drink. It was the one place for light and fellowship, the place where men gathered to talk of cows and horses, of range conditions, rodeos, and round-ups and hunting. Two or three townsmen or cowpunchers might even drop in with an accordian and a couple of guitars or a banjo.

"All right, button," said Johnny Poe. "But just for a hour or so."

He went into the saloon with Two-Bits close at his side.

It was early, but there were already a dozen or more townsmen and cowboys in the place. Ace Kinney was playing poker with the white-faced gambler and two cowboys, the fifth chair at the table

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being empty. The Box W puncher, Spike, was drinking and talking at the bar with Cotton. Their laughter came as a jarring note to Johnny. It didn't seem right that Spike knew Cotton as a friend.

Then the swing doors slap-slapped, and gray-bearded old Bill Watts came in. His shoulders sagged, and he walked heavily on his heels, like a man weighted down with trouble. He stopped near the table, made as if to speak to Kinney, then wiped his lips and stood silent. His eyes followed the drop of the cards and the passing of the money with an almost hungry look in them.

All at once, as if with sudden determination, he pulled out the empty chair, dropped heavily into it. His voice was husky as he spoke.

"Private game, or can anybody set in?" The words rang loudly through a room suddenly quiet.

The house gambler shot a glance at Ace Kinney, but Kinney's nod was easy and casual. "Shore, shore—set in. Usual game—jackpots an' table stakes. But yuh shore yuh don't wanta save that money for hay?"

"That's jest it." The old rancher's voice was bitter. "I might as well have no money as jest this hundred. It ain't enough—I gotta have five hundred at least. I can't let them dumb critters starve. Mebbe the Big Boss upstairs'll see it that way, too. Mebbe he'll let the cards fall lucky."

"Luck's like lightnin'—nobody can tell where it'll strike," said Kinney. He turned to the house gambler. "Deal Watt in, Keno."

Keno dealt, as Watt spread a thin sheaf of crumpled, worn banknotes on the table. Johnny Poe edged a step closer, his level eyes following each flick of the dealer's fingers. At his side he could feel Two-Bits crowding eagerly. Cotton and Spike had drifted over, were standing near the gambler, Keno.

WATT fanned out his cards carefully, looked, tossed them into the discard without staying for the draw. Twice he did this, before he played a hand. He was evidently playing them close to his chest. On the next deal, Kinney's, he won a small pot with three jacks.

It came Keno's deal again. Watt's nostrils quivered as he looked at his cards. When it came his turn to bet, he shoved twenty-five dollars into the center. The others stayed. Watt called for one card.

Keno dealt it to him. And as the long, thin fingers of the gambler flipped out the card, Johnny Poe's eyes narrowed. He heard a quick indrawn breath from Two-Bits. Johnny squeezed Two-Bits' arm, whispered in his ear. "Keep quiet! This ain't none of our business. It's up to every man to kill his own snakes!"

But Watt won again, this time with a full house. As he raked the winnings toward him, his fingers shook with nervousness. But the gambler, Keno, was glancing toward Ace Kinney. Johnny saw Kinney's eyelid droop, almost imperceptibly. Then the game was on again.

Watt was coming in on every hand now. Kinney and one of the cowboys won a small pot each, then Watt another one. And after a moment it was Keno's deal again. Cotton and Spike edged closer.

The gambler's fingers were like a white blur as they riffled, then after the cut flipped the cards around. Johnny saw Watt's lip corner twitch, knew he had good cards again. He opened with fifty dollars, Kinney and the other cowboys dropped out, and only Keno stayed in. Again Watt called for one card, and Keno's white fingers moved.

And then from just beside Johnny Poe came a boyish voice, husky, angry. "He cheated! He dealt that 'un off the bottom! An' he's got cards up his sleeve too!"

"Two-Bits!" gasped Johnny, turning with mingled dismay and fear, at sound

of Two-Bits' voice. At the same time Keno let out an oath, half started out of his chair.

But old Bill Watt had half risen, too. "Cheatin', huh?" He dropped his cards face up on the table, and with the same motion grabbed the gambler's hand, jerked the cards out of it. "You gimme the fourth king, but you'd *already* give yoreself four *aces!* You cheatin' scoundrel—you dirty tinhorn! Yo're too rotten even for coyotes to touch." He was grabbing at his holster.

As swiftly, though, as it had dealt the cards, the gambler's right hand had flashed inside his vest, out again. The short, double-barreled derringer was out and leveled before the cowman's Colt was clear of the table. With the crashing roar of the snub-nosed pocket-gun, old Bill Watt gasped, pitched off his chair.

"Call me a cheat, huh?" There was rage in Keno's voice. Not only rage but cold murder. He raised higher, leaned over to bring his still smoking derringer to bear on the cowman groaning on the floor. "Call me a cheat, huh? Well, you started this, but I'm goin' to finish it!"

"Hold it!" Johnny Poe's command cut through the gambler's words like keen steel. "Or if yo're still lookin' for a fight, Keno, *look this way!*"

GLARING, the gambler whirled that way, swiveling the derringer with him as he whirled. But though the gambler's gun was already out and he had but to steady it and pull trigger, the gun that roared was Johnny Poe's Frontier Colt. Barely missing the derringer, the .45 bullet ripped the full length of the gambler's forearm, crashed through the elbow beyond, shattering bone and tissue. With a shrill scream, Keno dropped the derringer, grabbed with his left hand at the mangled elbow, while two blood-stained cards dropped from his sleeve.

Quick as light, Johnny Poe swung the smoking Colt across the table again, its muzzle shifting constantly. Under its threat Ace Kinney sat still, his hands on the table, while Cotton, who with an oath had jerked both hands downward, brought his hands up empty again.

Keno, house gambler at the Ace-High Saloon.

"The Kid was right. . . . I saw this tin-horn deal off the bottom too!" said Johnny Poe grimly. "I reckon Keno won't be dealing crooked nor no other way with that smashed arm of his hereafter, but if any other fella here wants to take up his argument, I'm listenin'."

Only silence greeted the words, and Johnny Poe slowly holstered his gun. "Somebody git the doctor!" he ordered.

"Doctor?" Ace Kinney shrugged his shoulders. "This ain't Frisco, this is Bighorn. Ain't a regular sawbones closer than a hundred miles."

"Then git some water and a clean sheet. I want 'em for this cowman here. Yuh can 'tend to yore tinhorn, yoreselves—or let him bleed for all I keer!"

CHAPTER THREE

Feed—or Bullets!

HE BENT over the old cowman, worriedly ripped open his shirt and undershirt. But after a moment's examination, he gave a grunt of relief. "Yo're stuffed with horse-shoes, Old Timer," he said. "That bullet busted a rib, but then glanced off and on out to the side." He reached for the water and torn sheets that Two-Bits was anxiously holding out, and began to make a compress.

With the welcome touch of the cold water, Watt managed to sit up. He was white from shock, but his groan was from more than mere bodily injury. "I might just as well be dead," he said. "I can't even ride or scatter hay. An' I ain't got hay, nor money to buy it. My critters'll starve . . . an' mebbe my gal, Sallie, too."

"Well, they ain't starved yet," said Johnny Poe. He turned to Spike. "Yo're a Box W puncher, ain't yuh? Well, drive one o' them hay-wagons up in front here. We'll load yore boss on."

Spike hesitated a moment, then went out. The others had carried the whimpering gambler upstairs into the hotel. Only Ace Kinney stood with Cotton at the bar, drinking and talking in low tones.

Two-Bits caught at Johnny's sleeve, his voice broken and worried. "I . . I didn't mean to do it—the words slipped out 'fore I thought. But you said cheatin' was low-down, an' when I seen him slip that card—"

"Yeah—but yuh butted in. An' yuh almost got this old cowman killed," said Johnny grimly. "Now we gotta do somethin' about it."

"What? What can we do?"

But Johnny Poe didn't answer. He had finished his bandaging, and stood up. He went straight to Ace Kinney at the bar.

"Yuh still want them hosses?"

Ace Kinney stared, then nodded. "Shore. But I thought—"

"Then they're yore's. For four hunderd, though—not five hundred. 'Cause that star-faced black pony don't go with 'em. He's my pardner's, an' he ain't mine to sell."

Kinney nodded again, reached toward his pocket. "Four hundred it is—you keep the star-face and the pack-hosses. Want it in big notes or little?"

"Neither," said Johnny Poe crisply. "I'm takin' it in hay an' oats—an' I'll be takin' the first two loads tonight. An' Watt's table stake an' his share o' that last pot ought to buy still more."

"Watt's?" Kinney's mouth and eyes opened, while Cotton gasped. "Yuh mean yo're buyin' hay an' oats for Bill Watt?"

"That's right," said Johnny Poe. "An' I want it all ready when I call for it." He turned, to find Two-Bits had tagged right behind him. "You go git our war-bags down, button. We're ridin' with the wagons an' Bill Watt."

But Two-Bits shoved past him, to touch Ace Kinney's arm. The youngster's eyes were blinking, and there was a choking in his voice, but he got the words out high and shrill. "Yuh can make that *five* hun-

derd, Mister. 'Cause I'm throwin' Star in with the others!"

THE ride out to the Box W, in the lower one of the Twin Valleys, was a rough one, and the old rancher was almost unconscious when Johnny Poe alighted with him in his arms before the ranch house. The slender sixteen year old girl who opened the door let out a cry, but Johnny Poe as quickly reassured her.

"Now there ain't nothin' to worry about, ma'am. Yore dad just had a little accident."

"Accident!" She gave a gasp as Johnny Poe laid the old man on the bed. When he turned to her, she had caught herself with a determination that drew an approving glance from Johnny. "You mean he had a fight, and Ace Kinney or that gunman of his, Cotton Weaver, shot him. I was afraid. . . . I knew it would happen! I had a feeling. . . ."

"Well, it coulda been a lot worse," said Johnny cheerfully. "He's just peaked now from loss o' blood. If you could just fix up some hot coffee or soup—"

She was gone like a flash, moving out toward the kitchen.

The front door opened again, and boot heels sounded. But instead of Two-Bits who had driven the wagon on to the barn, it was a weazened old puncher of over fifty who stood there, six-gun on hip, gray eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You the Box W foreman?" inquired Johnny.

"I'm Rawhide Rollin, an' I been nursin' Box W cows since Miss Sallie was a yearlin' herself," was the crisp answer. "But who the hell are you, an' what you doin' here?"

"I'm Johnny Poe—Mr. Watt just hired me tonight," said Johnny. "But there's a half-load o' oats an' hay out at the barn. We didn't have time for a full load. If you'll just roll out the other hands an' unload it—"

"Other hands!" Rawhide Rollin's lips twisted. "I'm the *only* hand, outside Spike Norman. The Old Man did git some feed, then?"

Johnny nodded. "Spike's comin' on behind with another load. An' tomorrow we'll have to keep the wagons rolling till we get it all out. With Mr. Watt sick, you'll have to ramrod the spread, I reckon."

But the weazened puncher shook his head. "I'm a cow-hand, an' I can nurse cows an' spread hay. But I ain't no ramrod, I don't know nothin' about it. It's shore goin' to be hell."

"Well, if you'll help Two-Bits, he's a button, an' my pardner, I'll be along directly."

Rawhide Rollin stumbled out. There was a movement at the bed, and Bill Watt wet his lips and looked at Johnny Poe sharply.

"I heard yuh. But I didn't hire yuh, I ain't got no money to hire nobody. Nor no winter-feed, an' after the first big snow, I won't have no critters. They're bound to starve."

"Yuh lie back an' take it easy," ordered Johnny crisply. "I didn't ask yuh for no money, did I? When we git things straightened out I'll ask for my wages, but if I'm ramroddin' this spread, I'm seein' my orders is carried out. Didn't yuh hear me say to lie back?"

With a little sigh the old ranchman settled back onto the pillow. He blinked his eyes, and the lashes glinted with moisture. "I reckon the Big Boss Upstairs wasn't asleep after all. But I don't see why yuh—"

"Schoolin'," said Johnny Poe enigmatically. "Can't bust broncs in snow-time, so we're puttin' it in on the Button's education."

Then he turned to grin at the girl as she came hurrying in with a steaming cup and bowl. She placed them beside the bed and made her father more comfortable.

CHAPTER FOUR

Traitor in the Camp!

AS A ramrod, however, he drove them relentlessly, not only the two hands, but himself and Two-Bits as well. Day and night the wagons rolled, dumping the sacked grain in the barn, the hay into big stacks in the empty corral at an angle between the ranch house and the bunkhouse, and within easy sight from the windows of each. The gaunt-ribbed cattle, sniffing the hay, pressed their muzzles against the bars and bellowed, but Johnny Poe shook his head.

"They gotta root for themselves for a while yet. We'll be needin' that food."

He set them next, to jerking the wheels off the hay-wagons, and replacing them with the big, wide sled-runners of the snow country. It was then that Spike broke into open rebellion.

"It's damn foolishness! Why didn't the old fool sell out to Kinney when he had the offer? He can't run the Box W with two hands, an' himself wounded."

"If you don't like it here," said Johnny, grimly. "You can draw yore time."

But oddly, Spike dropped his eyes, and went grumblingly back to work. "Ain't no time of year for a man to hunt work."

Johnny Poe looked after him with narrowed eyes. And the next day, riding the far reaches of the up-valley with Rawhide, to get the lay of the land, he spoke to Rawhide.

Rawhide spat scornfully. "Spike's been spendin' too much time loafin' 'round Bighorn an' lappin' up licker with that Kinney foreman, Cotton. He ain't no real puncher." Then he spat again. "Funny, but now I think of it, he was right there that night the haystacks burned, but he never seen nor heard nothin'. An' them cows that was rustled—he was s'posed to be ridin' them parts, both times."

"Friend of Cotton's, huh?" Johnny Poe thoughtfully rolled a quirly. "Cotton's Ace Kinney's gunman, is he?"

"Yeah an' lightnin' quick." Rawhide nodded. "But at that he ain't even close to Ace Kinney. They say he gits white an' stutters, when his boss even looks squint-eyed at him. It was lucky for Watt he was up against Keno, an' not Kinney."

They were at the head of the Box W range now, and Johnny Poe could readily see how rustlers could have raided the Box W herd. The head of the valley ran almost into another valley that was separated from it only by a low hill ridge, an off-thrown spur from the main rim that was the foothills of the Blue Peaks themselves. With right conditions it would have been easy for rustlers to have chased stolen cows over the breaks of that spur ridge into the other valley, which was part of Ace Kinney's range.

With his brow furrowed, Johnny Poe rode back to the Box W and had a long talk with Bill Watt, who was already able to sit in a chair. Thereafter the old ranchman pulled his chair up to the window almost at daylight, and spent most of his day there overlooking the corral and haystacks, a loaded Winchester across his lap or on the floor beside him.

In the bunkhouse Johnny drew Two-Bits aside and spoke to him in low tones.

"You lie down at night with yore clothes on, an' whatever you do you keep an ear an' eye peeled toward that corral. Any unusual thing you hear or see, you wake me up right away. At midnight you wake me anyway, an' I'll take over till daylight."

Still the weather held off, though the skies remained heavy and the temperatures had dropped to bitter cold. Tired out by his constant riding and heavy responsibility, Johnny Poe slept like a log each night, the moment he hit the bunk.

Rawhide Rollin, older and thinner, was dragging his heels when he walked. Only Two-Bits, with the boundless vigor of youth, was as lively and eager as ever, as he went about his special duties of looking after the Box W cavvy of raw-boned cow-ponies. At Johnny's order he kept three night horses ready in the stalls of the barn.

IT WAS on a night that Johnny thought himself even wearier than usual, that the thing happened. One moment he was sleeping soundly; the next he was struggling out of the blankets, while heavy hands grabbed at him and loud words battered at his ears. "Get up! Quick, Johnny, wake up!"

Then he realized that the hands and voice were those of Rawhide Rollin and that even before that, his fogged memory had echoed with something like a gunshot.

Then while Johnny still blinked and fought off sleep, the hands left him, there was the noise of a struck match, and the bunkhouse leaped into yellow light. Rawhide had lighted the bunkhouse lamp. And glancing across at the bunk where Two-Bits usually slept, Johnny saw that it was empty. Neither Two-Bits nor Spike were in the bunkhouse.

Then with a bang the door burst open, and a snarling, cursing figure stumbled in, hands in air. It was Spike. And from immediately behind him came Two-Bits' shrill threat. "You keep 'em up an' git on in there! You keep 'em up or I'll buzz another bullet past yore ear!"

Spike was fully dressed, even to sixgun and sheepskin coat. His oaths were loud and bitter, and his eyes were glaring, but he kept his hands up and there was a whiteness around the corners of his mouth.

"Git that gun outa my back, yuh damn young whelp!" he bellowed. "By God, I'll wear yore own gunbelt out on yuh for this!"

"Yeah?" cried Two-Bits. "You will, huh? Just wait till Johnny hears how I caught yuh! How I caught yuh inside the corral, down behind the hay-stack, strikin' a match!"

"HUH?" Johnny Poe's eyes went thin. He was on his feet, his gunbelt buckled, the walnut butt almost knocking his finger-tips. "What was yuh doin' in the hay corral at this time o' night, Spike?"

"He was fixin' to set it afire!" yelped Two-Bits. "I heard 'im get up, an' sneak out, an' I follered! He was just fixin' to set the hay afire when I buzzed a bullet past him."

"Yo're—yo're a liar!" blustered Spike. "I just thought I heard a noise out there, hosses, mebbe an' I went out to see. I thought mebbe it might be somebody tryin' to burn the hay again."

"Yeah?" Johnny's answer was dry. "An' so yuh struck a match to see, huh? Struck a match, knowin' if it was any hay burners, they'd see an' blow yore insides out the minute yuh showed in the light!"

"I didn't," retorted the cowpuncher desperately. "There wasn't nobody there, but I thought if they had been they might come back ag'in. So to keep awake, I started a smoke. I loaded up my pipe, an' then knelt close behind the stack to light it, so the stack'd shut out the light in case there was anybody out there waitin'."

"Then le'me see yore pipe." Johnny shot the words out.

Slowly the puncher drew from his sheepskin coat a short-stemmed pipe. Johnny took one look at it. "You said you'd *loaded* yore pipe. Well there ain't a sign o' tobacco in this 'un! I believe yo're lyin', Spike. I believe you was fixin' to burn that hay, just like yuh burnt it that other time, an' mebbe helped rustle them stolen cows." He turned to Rawhide Rollin. "What yuh think we ought

to do with a low coyote like this, Rawhide?"

"Shoot 'im in the guts—or else stretch his neck with a rope," tersely said the weazened puncher.

"No—no. . . . I tell yuh I was just lightin' my pipe!" cried Spike, his voice half whimper. "You—you wouldn't murder a man in cold blood!"

"You'da murdered thousands o' dumb critters in even a worse way, burnin' that hay," said Johnny Poe coldly. "You'da starved 'em to death. That's as cold-blooded, or worse, even, than killin' a man."

"Wait—I'll git the rope!" cried Two-Bits, his voice excited.

THE words brought Johnny up with a start. And his decision was as quick. "I may be a fool, Spike, but I'm lettin' yuh go. I ain't never lynched a man yet, an' I ain't startin'. So roll yore blankets an' ride. An' I'm warnin' yuh that the next time I set eye on yuh, I'm settin' my sights on yuh."

With a sigh of relief, Spike made no delay in rolling up his blankets. He started for the door.

"Never mind takin' a hoss," said Johnny coldly. "Yuh kin walk to yore boss in Bighorn. Mebbe you'll have time to think up a good excuse on the way."

Standing in the doorway, Spike sent a vengeful glare back. "Yuh may be a tough bronc-buster on yore home-range, fella—but just wait till yuh buck up against Ace Kinney or Cotton. They'll trim yuh down to road-runner size in no time." Then he whipped a malignant glance toward Two-Bits. "As for yuh, yuh damn puppy, just wait till I ketch yuh. . . !" The next moment he was out of the door, and gone in the darkness.

Two-Bits let out a yelp of anger, leaped toward the door. But Johnny's hand caught him, jerked him back.

"Git back in here! An' whatta yuh mean, trailin' 'im out there by yoreself in the first place? Didn't I tell yuh just to wake me up? "

"But I did. I yelled at yuh twice!" protested Two-Bits. "When yuh didn't wake up, I knew I had to trail 'im myself, or it'd be too late."

Slowly Johnny Poe shook his head. "Yuh don't never seem able to learn. Hereafter, Rawhide an' me'll take turns ridin' night-herd on that hay."

Rawhide, who had gone to the door and stood looking and listening, came back in, held out his hand. On it a big snowflake stood out white and crinkly, just beginning to melt. "Reckon it'll be a cold walk into Bighorn for that hombre. The big snow's on her way!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Fool's Errand

AT DAYBREAK they were on the move, both hay-carts loaded. Johnny drove one with Two-Bits; and to his amazement, the girl Sallie climbed aboard the other with Rawhide, pitchfork in hand. Old Bill Watt, already at the window, waved Johnny's protests down.

"She can pitch hay with any man, an' she'll be plenty safe with Rawhide. I'll keep watch here. But be keerful—don't get lost, if a blizzard comes."

But the snow, though steady, was not a blizzard yet. Assigning Rawhide to spread his hay on the near side, Johnny drove the hay-wagon down and across the dry river bed, then up the wide flats on the farther side and to the extreme north end of the Box W range.

Despite the wide sled runners, it became slow work as the snow deepened above the horses' fetlocks. With afternoon, the bitter wind increased along with the thickening snow, until the heavy flakes were driving almost at right angles. Johnny started homeward, keeping his direction by the

wind, for even the nearest landmarks were beginning to fade out in the white blur and the fading light.

"Lucky we started when we did," he said. "Man could get lost in this, an' freeze. See—even the cows are already starting to drift." And he pointed toward where a dozen cows were slowly drifting down the valley before the wind.

That night they were so tired that it was sheer cruelty to have to stay awake, much less make frequent scouting trips out around the corral stacks which were already becoming white mountains under the snow.

In the morning they spread hay again, but this time closer to the ranch house, and coming in at noon for a hot meal. The wind was bitterer than ever, and the snow was now almost like a white, swirling wall that opened a score of yards ahead of them, only to close in swiftly behind.

When they sat down to the ranch table, they ate like starving men. After they finished, Rawhide and Two-Bits returned to the bunkhouse, but Johnny lingered to talk with Bill Watt.

"Critters are already driftin'," he reported. "But we're lucky one way; the wind's driftin' 'em right down the valley, away from that ridge pass over onto Kinney's range."

But Watt gave a gloomy sigh. "Kinney's got another outfit down the river a ways. If they drift far down that way, they'll be goners anyway."

Johnny started back to the bunkhouse. He had taken only a few steps, when suddenly from outside came the crash of a rifle. Two-Bits' voice cried out with excitement. The next moment a dark shape, man and horse, burst into sight around the corral, the rider firing at the bunkhouse as he raced away.

"Spike! I'll bet he come back, like he said he would!" Grabbing the Winchester from its place beside the door, Johnny whipped four bullets screaming after the fleeing rider, but the black shape was already vanishing.

Putting down the gun, Johnny hurried toward the bunkhouse, calling as he went. "Two-Bits; Two-Bits, are you hurt?"

But instead of an answer, there was another muffled thudding of hoofs, and another horse and rider whirled by, this time from the direction of the stable, and spurring hard in the direction the first rider had taken.

At sight of the slight figure perched on the saddle, Johnny's heart sank. "Two-Bits!" he yelled.

Two-Bits must have heard him, for his shouted, broken words came back though he himself did not even slow. "It was Spike, an' he's ridin' my Star pony! I'd know that whinny anywhere. I'm goin' after 'im!"

Then Two-Bits, too, was lost in the

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blizzard, heading straight toward the river bed.

CRAZILY, Johnny Poe ran toward the barn, saddled a horse without even knowing how he did it. He was swinging into the saddle when Rawhide came running up.

"Two-Bits'll be lost out there!" cried Johnny. "You stay here an' keep an eye on the stacks. I'm goin' after Two-Bits!"

Within fifty yards the bunkhouse was lost from sight. But remembering his directions and the quarter of the wind, Johnny crossed the flat and came out on the dry river bank.

Across, and directly ahead of him, two gunshots rattled in the white blur. At least the sound seemed to come from directly ahead. One of those guns was a rifle, the other a Colt—and Two-Bits carried a Colt.

"Two-Bits!" yelled Johnny, spurring down into the bed.

But after half an hour of riding and shouting, there was no sign of any human. Johnny began to feel sick inside. He rode farther into the white blur that opened out a score of feet ahead of him.

And then he found himself in the midst of cows. Not cows straggling along like creatures before a blizzard, but cows closer bunched, shoving forward at a gait far faster. Men's voices, shouts, drifted down wind, even though the men themselves and their mounts were still hidden by the blizzard. Rustlers, familiar with the country, taking advantage of the concealing storm and the natural drift of the stock before it, to rustle several hundred head down the valley and off the Box W range before the snow ceased.

Whirling his mount around, Johnny spurred fast away, bending low in the saddle and hoping that he would not be seen. He mumbled a little unconscious prayer that Two-Bits had not got this far, would not run into the rustlers.

Johnny headed back toward the dry river. Then it was that he ran onto Two-Bits' horse, the hammer-headed Box W pony he always rode. It was a dark heap in the snow, the legs already stiffening in the icy wind. But though Johnny recognized both the youngsters saddle and bridle, there was no sign of the rider.

Johnny Poe's heart pounded with alternate fear and hope. Two-Bits hadn't been shot, but was afoot somewhere in this puzzle of white. A man couldn't live long here.

Trying to cast a half circle around the dead animal, Johnny rode and shouted. He cast another and wider semicircle.

And then not he, but his horse, found it. At the animal's snort Johnny glanced that way, and saw it almost under his horse's hoofs.

A sprawled human thing pitched face-down in the snow, a thing so stiff and twisted that Johnny knew at once it was dead. Feeling as if his own heart had ceased to beat, Johnny leaped down, turned it over.

JOHNNY'S heart bounded skyward. It was not Two-Bits, but Spike. The grimace of pain and shock was still frozen on his face, his coat-front a stiff, clotted mass of sheepskin and blood. Two-Bits' Colt threw a heavy bullet.

But where was Two-Bits? Had he too been wounded, to travel a hundred yards and then fall, to bleed and stiffen? Or was he somewhere out there, struggling through the snow, trying to find landmarks of which he knew little or nothing.

It wasn't until his mount came to a sudden halt that Johnny with a sinking effort discovered that he had come back to the river bank once more.

Then all at once, off to his left, he heard a shout. But the figure that loomed up out of the driving snow was Rawhide Rollin. He hailed Johnny, then went grave as he

saw there was only one man and one horse. After he had listened for a moment, he tried to bring some hope back to Johnny's breast.

"Like cows, a man'll drift in front of a blizzard without realizin' it. We oughta look lower down. You stick close to the bank an' I'll ride out a ways, we'll cover twice as much ground thataway. But I ain't figurin' him lost as yet, he's a bright button, that younker, an' he uses his head for somep'n else than jest a place to hang his hat."

Once more the search began, working down this time, and with Johnny keeping just a bit out from the dry river bed. He had forgotten that he had not even mentioned to Rawhide about the rustlers.

The fact was brought back to him suddenly by a loud shout from Rawhide, a curse, and then a fusillade of shots. Rawhide had run into the rustlers, swinging their stolen cows in as the stream bed twisted.

Cursing himself for the carelessness that might have brought the old puncher into a death trap, Johnny drove his spurs deep and ploughed that way. And almost before he knew it, he was right in the midst of them. Men loomed to the right and left of him, cows floundered and plunged, and Johnny's sixgun was leaping and bucking in his hand.

The rustler to his left suddenly vanished from his saddle, then another to his right. The third man turned with a curse and a spitting gun on Johnny. By the man's shouted curse, Johnny recognized him as Cotton.

Surprise or the driving snow had shaken the rustler's aim. One bullet screamed past Johnny's ear, the next ripped Johnny's sleeve and drew blood from a raking slash. But Johnny's own bullet sped true to the mark. Even amid the snow Johnny saw the rustler reel in the saddle. The gun in Johnny's hand bucked again, and this time Cotton reeled farther over and plunged into the snow.

In that second, even as Johnny heard Rawhide's shout and bellowing gun to his left, a new noise cut the air, sent Johnny's pulse pounding. For it was high and boyish—Two-Bits' unmistakable war-whoop. "Come an' git it! I been waitin' for yuh, an' I ain't figurin' on walkin' no further!"

Whirling his spent mount about, Johnny drove that way.

BUT it was another horse and rider that showed suddenly ahead of him, between him and the river bank. And this time Johnny seemed almost by instinct to know that this was Ace Kinney, the rustler leader himself.

He flung a quick shot toward Johnny, and Johnny answered with another of his own. Both missed. And then as Johnny thumbed the hammer again, only a metallic click came, instead of the bucking roar. He had fired his last cartridge.

And Kinney must have realized that, from the very silence of Johnny's gun. He loomed out of the snow, face twisted, gun leveled. Johnny could even see the black mustache, the glaring eyes over the leveled sixgun. He set himslf to meet the shock of the coming bullets.

But none came. Instead there was a bellowing roar from the bank of the riverbed just beyond, another rattling crash and then Two-Bits' whoop. "*Told* yuh I wasn't walkin'! See if yuh can swaller that an' still set a saddle!"

With the second crash of the old Colt, Ace Kinney rose in his stirrups. He let out a half scream, dropped his gun and fell, almost under Johnny's mount.

Then the shouts and the shooting suddenly stilled. Johnny was out of the saddle and stumbling toward the slight figure that was scrambling up over the river edge. He did not even hear Rawhide's arrival, or the old puncher's triumphant shout that the other rustlers, what were left of them, had scattered, were fleeing.

BACK at the Box W ranch house, Johnny could still scarcely talk, scarcely take his eyes off Two-Bits' freckled face.

"Shucks, I wasn't lost!" Two-Bits was announcing scornfully. "I remembered the wind was from the north, so the river bed must be to the west. I kept the wind on my right cheek till I hit the river. Then I worked down it, figurin' to reach that big pool, 'cause I knowed the pool was almost opposite the corral an' bunkhouse."

"Told yuh he was a bright button," grinned Rawhide. He turned to Bill Watt. "Don't make no difference if the critters does drift now. They'll just drift on down the river, an' we'll pick 'em up an' drive 'em back any time we please. With Kinney an' Cotton both gone, I reckon we won't have no more trouble."

The old ranchman nodded. "There's still plenty honest men around Bighorn, only they been sorta buffaloed by Ace and his gunmen. With Ace an' Cotton outa the way, the honest men'll come back into their own. After Kinney bein' killed red-handed in a rustling job, I reckon we can git back-pay for all the previous stealin' they done. We'll all take a fair split outa Kinney's herds, an' hay an' oats too."

"An' I'm claimin' my Star hoss back," announced Two-Bits belligerently. "We'll git all our hosses back, won't we, Johnny? If we don't, me an' you'll load up an' ride into town an' tell 'em over a gun-barrel, won't we, Johnny?"

The girl Sallie, turned to Johnny. "I don't know how we ever can thank you, Johnny, but in the Spring, we ought to be able to pay you. And you'll have to stay here until Spring now—you won't be able to get out through the mountains until the snow thaws."

"Oh no, we ain't stayin'," announced Two-Bits hurriedly. "We got bronc-bustin' to do, ain't we, Johnny? We don't let a little thing like snow or rustlin' stop us, do we, Johnny?"

But looking at the boy's excited face and sparkling eyes, Johnny remembered things. . . . He remembered a dead man lying in the snow, and another man plunging off his horse with a scream. And he remembered another boy, too—Billy the Kid—who had made just such a start, and had ended up in an outlaw's grave.

"Why, yeah, Miss Sallie. Like you said, we can't get out now till the snow thaws. We'll be glad to stay if we can round up some books somewhere."

"Books!" Two-Bits stared. "What sorta books?"

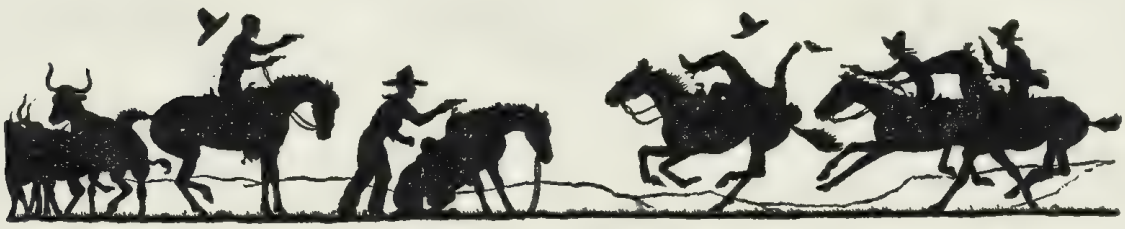
"Readin' books," said Johnny. "Readin' an' writin' an' 'rithmetic. I reckon we can find some somewhere, can't we, Miss Sallie? An mebbe you could help with the schoolin'. . . ."

"Why certainly I can," said the girl quickly. "I'll be glad to."

The excitement died from Two-Bits' face, the sparkle from his eyes. He put down a piece of apple pie unfinished.

"Readin' an' writin' an' 'rithmetic—" he said disgustedly. "Aw, shucks!"

THE END



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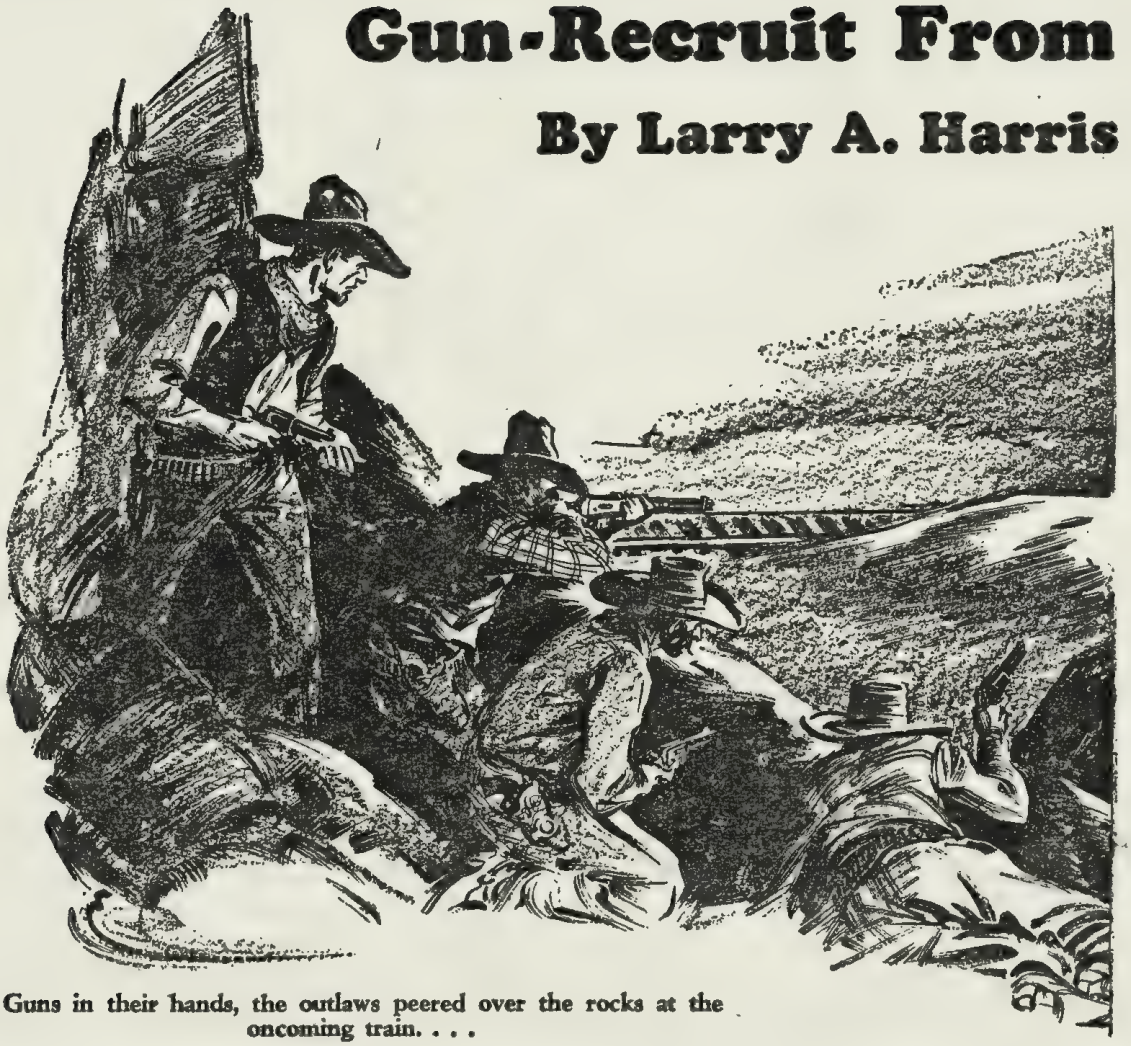

Guns in their hands, the outlaws peered over the rocks at the oncoming train. . . .

As Doby Smith, outcast, Jim Shannon, honest rancher, rode with the Swede's raider-crew, determined to toll that reckless renegade chief to the law's hangnoose. . . . How, then, could Jim set that old longrider up at Jim's own ranch—as honest boss of the very spread he and his outlaw crew had doomed to destruction?

CHAPTER ONE

One Way Out of Hell

THERE was no moon, and that was in their favor. The darkness was thick and black as nights can be in Old Mexico. Sweat crawled down the faces of the six outlaws who lay on their bellies at the edge of the high cutbank. Below them the railroad track began its rise into the hills.

Several minutes ago, when they had left their horses back in the brush, the Swede had said: "She'll come as near bein' on time as any Mex train, I spose. Soft pickin's for us. If the boss' tip is right there'll be fifty thousand pesos in gold aboard her. That'll make a stake for us all, boys."

The Swede hadn't sensed the tension among his men then; nor did he now. He was a huge, powerfully-built man, beyond his prime. He had the deep-set hungry eyes of a man who has never understood life. It was pathetic the way he had tried to fight off old age. Every man in

Hell's Back Yard • • •

Action Novel of Our Borderland Frontier

the bunch knew he had dyed his hair with berry juice to keep out the gray.

Beside the Swede lay his men, listening. There was Frio Ganz, double-gunned, nervous and furtive-eyed as a snake. Near him was Jake Muldoon, the silent one, who grinned when he killed. Brandt and Garza, the breed, were next—both of them wanted for a dozen crimes. And at the Swede's left lay the one who called himself Doby Smith, a lank Texan whose chill blue eyes were always watchful.

Garza was first to hear the train coming, and a second later the Swede's six-shooter came into his big fist. He didn't see the ugly grin of contempt on the breed's lips.

"You boys all know what you're to do," he said heavily. "Foller me down the slope. Smith, you're new, so we'll be watchin' you. You an' Brandt will handle the engineer an' fireman. Me an' Ganz will bust into the baggage car while Garza an' Muldoon keep the passengers quiet."

Brandt sneered: "Don't forget them plans 'fore you get down the hill, Swede."

One of the men laughed. Slow anger burned in the Swede's eyes when he said: "There's this job an' then one more for me, Brandt. I'll be through then. When they're finished you an' me's got some scores to settle."

"Shut up, Swede!" Ganz snarled nervously. "Here she comes!"

The headlight beam of the small Mexican engine speared through the sultry black night as it rounded a curve. The outlaws flattened, peering over the rim. Steel rails sang; the slap and pull of the piston arms, the hiss of steam filled the hills with echoes. Lighted windows of the wooden passenger coaches came nearer, as the engine puffed and snorted on the upgrade.

The train was moving at barely more than a fast walk. As the engine and tender

drew parallel with the outlaws, the Swede climbed to his feet lumberingly, his seamy face taut.

"Now!" he hissed.

FIVE men plunged down the slope behind him. Doby Smith was at his heels, eyes on the engine cab. They were at the toe of the cutbank, within thirty feet of the moving train, when the Swede suddenly stumbled. As his hulking body pitched to the ground his gun exploded in the air. And as if that shot had been a signal, all hell broke loose. A uniformed Rurale bobbed into the window of the cab, a rifle pressed to his shoulder and flaming. Pistol fire spurted from the windows of the passenger coaches and screamed Spanish curses adding to the roar of guns.

Doby Smith dived to the Swede's side as questing lead dug up the dirt bank around them. In that fleeting instant he saw the bafflement and rage in the big outlaw leader's eyes as death closed in on them. The train had stopped. Shadows churned as Mexicans came running along the siding toward them, shooting.

"I—I tripped, Smith," the Swede croaked.

"Run for it, you fool!" Doby Smith barked.

Then they were both on their feet, desperately clawing their way up the dirt bank, stumbling, sliding. Frio Ganz and the other outlaws were already clambering over the rim to safety, cursing and shooting back to discourage pursuit. Breath gushed from the Swede's lungs in great gulps. He wasn't as agile as he had once been. His strength was fast ebbing.

"Go on, Smith!" he panted.

Smith grinned coldly. "We go together, Swede!"

Doby Smith paid one glance back. The baggage car doors were thrown wide, flooding the darkness with a shaft of light. Rurales were yelling, whipping saddled horses down a gang-plank to the ground. From out of the darkness near the rim came Brandt's throaty bellow of rage.

"Rurales! An' with their hosses hid in the mail coach, by God! They was tipped off an' waitin' for us. Smith—"

"Save your gab or eat belly lead, Brandt!" the Swede roared. "No time now to fight among ourselves. Make for the hosses!"

The Swede raced through the brush toward the picketed mounts, bawling to his men, a great disheveled figure with a gun clenched in one fist. They hit leather and bolted after him as the mounted Rurales topped the hill at their backs. Down into a ravine they roared, their guns giving answer to the Mexicans that were hot on their heels.

Outnumbered and hard-pressed, the Swede led his men in that wild ride northward toward the Border. Through a sheer-walled canyon the outlaw band thundered, feeding the steel to their tiring horses. With all the cunning of the outlaw breed, the Swede tried doggedly to throw off his pursuers. Twice he swerved into angling draws. But each time the Mexicans came after them, like wolves lusting for the kill.

Then where the hills dipped down to a broad desert basin, the Swede swung into the open. Only the dense gloom saved them. Spurring like a madman, the Swede rose in the stirrups, scorning the lead that screamed around him. His huge body swayed to the motion of his lunging horse.

"Make for the rocks, boys!" he hollered at the top of his lungs. "There we'll make our stand. It's our only chance!"

This was the Swede, leader of a hellion crew, that some of the men knew from the old days—when he had held the respect of as tough a Border-hopping outfit as ever rode the River. A rip-roaring, two-fisted fighting man who'd spit in the dev-

il's eye; a man who could think in a tight as clearly and quickly as the best of them.

Before them in the night a huge knob of jutting rocks suddenly loomed out of the heat-tortured basin. With not a second to spare the Swede sent his stumbling pony up into that maze of boulders. Doby Smith at his heels, with the other men strung out behind. In the dust-filled darkness they swung down, raced to vantage points among the rocks. And there they made their stand with the Swede's strident yells carrying through the gun-thunder.

"Save your ca'tridges, boys! Don't shoot at shadders!"

LEAD was smashing into the rocks about them as the Mexicans below left their horses and began creeping up afoot. A ricocheting bullet nipped Garza's shoulder. The shock of it spun him face to face with the big outlaw leader. Fear and rage burned in the breed's red eyes.

"Because of you we must die!" he screamed in Spanish. "You awkward *viejo* of a mismated goat, you led us into that death-trap. I'm sick of listening to your orders. *Por Dios,* I'm making a run for it!"

The Swede's big fist lashed out like the hoof of a kicking mule, knocking the breed flat. Then he was facing his outlaw pack, his voice lashing out with scorn.

"Run, eh? Not as long as I'm alive an' kickin'." We die fightin' as one—or we run as one! We was framed on that job tonight. If I hadn't stumbled an' shot wild we'd all been dead by now. And I aim to find out who the snake was!"

"Meanin'?" Doby Smith cut in icily.

Every eye was on Smith, who was new to the bunch. In the sudden lull of firing every outlaw there was primed and dangerous, waiting for death to strike.

"I'm just wonderin'," the Swede rumbled.

"You'd best save your wonderin' till later, Swede," Smith rapped tightly.

"Doby Smith"

"That is, if you want to save your neck. Those Mexes don't aim for us to get out of here alive. In another thirty minutes they'll have this knob surrounded. Our horses have had a breather. They're good for the river. That crevice through the rocks leads to a trail down the back way. In this case I'd say we'd best make a run for it."

"You seem to know this strip purty well, Smith," Ganz sneered suspiciously.

"I do," Smith grinned bleakly.

Indecision was plain in the Swede's eyes as he scanned the faces of his men. A rock rattled down the hillside below them. Another burst of shots from the Mexicans spanged into the boulders. Garza crawled to his knees, his voice a croak of terror.

"They're coming closer!"

"Run she'll be then, boys!" the Swede boomed. "If you've lied about a back trail out of here, Smith, I'll live to kill you!"

"A man don't lie in a tight like this, Swede!" Smith snapped. "Hurry up, damn it!"

Then the Swede was bellowing orders as his men leaped to their horses. "Through the crevice an' find the trail, if there is one. Each man for hisself. One

at a time. An' when you reach the lowland, scatter! Meet me at my shack in the badlands in a week. Got it? *Bueno,* Garza, stop your whinin' an' go first!"

Like a black streak the breed stabbed his bronc with steel and shot through the rocky crevice. Above the firing the other men heard the receding drumming of the breed's horse's hoofs.

Frio Ganz was next; then Brandt and big Jake Muldoon. The Swede's gun jerked up, roaring as the dim figure of a Mexican suddenly swooped over a boulder. The Mexican screamed and fell, his rifle clattering to the ground.

"You next, Smith!" the Swede yelled. And he whirled to see Doby Smith's six-shooter covering him.

The tall Texan was grinning mirthlessly. "As I said, Swede—we go together. Mount an' ride!"

If the Swede was momentarily nonplussed he hid it well behind an angry bellow. In one leap he hit leather and bolted, bent low as bullets droned over him. At his back he heard the clatter of Doby Smith's horse. In his path a blurred figure took shape. A rifle roared in the Swede's face, stinging his eyes with powder, the bullet grazing his cheek.

Cursing, the Swede shot from the hip and the figure crumpled. Then there were other Mexicans, popping up from everywhere in the darkness, shooting frenziedly—and missing. Down that dim trail the Swede spurred, running the gauntlet of lead, and somehow winning out. As he reached the basin floor he had the vague feeling that Doby Smith had also come through alive. He glanced back, but the Texan was nowhere in sight.

Elation fetched a croaking hoarse laugh to the Swede's lips. "Damn 'em all!" he muttered. "They'll never get me."

It was queer the way the Swede talked to himself as he lashed his horse on toward the River. His shaggy dyed hair ruffled low over his feverish eyes. Sweat streamed down his grizzled face. His hat was gone.

He slowed when the sounds of firing were gone. He scanned the darkness all around him for some signs of his men. But no living thing did he see.

"Boys," he called guardedly, but there was no answer.

CHAPTER TWO

Rustler's Return

THE Swede rode slowly across the shallow River, and later he turned into a cottonwood canyon where a startled deer bounded out of his path. Here in this tumbled Big Bend badlands a feeling of security came over him. Here in this canyon-gashed land of brush and rocks and mountains a man could hide out from the law for years.

In the deep gloom before dawn, the Swede rode into a small circular basin. Sandhills and mesquite loomed higher than the horse's head. In a *mota* of scrub oak, he stopped before the plank door of a squalid 'dobe hut, and dismounted.

Inside he touched a match to a lantern. There was only one room with a rickety cast-iron stove, crude chairs and a table. Some old clothes hung from a wall peg. A blanket lay spread on the dirt floor in one corner. On the sagging plank door some one had taken a hot poker and burned several brands.

The Swede wolfed some of the canned food, washing it down with water from a canteen. Just before daylight he sat down at the table. From a desk drawer he took some paper and an envelope. With a pencil he began a laborious scrawl.

Dear Bill:

I'm so busy with ranch work I find it hard to write. Things are goin' fine for me here on the Leaning S. You just keep the money I sent and buy you and the baby some purty things. A young feller like you ought to be

with his father and that's the way I aim to have it. But right now it's best that you stay there in St. Louis with your aunt.

It'll be nice havin' you and the baby with me. That's all I been workin' for. But till I kinda get things straightened around here you just wait.

The new foreman I got is a feller by the name of Smith—Doby Smith. He's fine with cows but I may have to fire him because he drinks kinda heavy.

Your dad.

With his sweaty hands he folded the letter, stuffed it into an addressed envelope and sealed it. He heard the stir in the doorway then and whirled, right hand stabbing to his gun. A man's brittle command froze his movements.

"I got you, Swede! Make a wrong move an' I'll shoot."

DOBY SMITH stood framed in the doorway, a leveled six-shooter in his hand. In the hazy light his tanned face was hard. His big Stetson and denims were gray with dust. He eased forward, took the Swede's gun from the holster and tossed it out the window.

"I've waited a long time to do this, Swede," he said.

"Then you're a lawman?"

"No, Swede. Just one of the cowmen of Ladino Basin that you an' the bunch have been rustlin' blind. Ready to go peaceful?"

Strangely the Swede didn't appear surprised. He sank down into the chair, shoulders sagging. He must have known he was done. All his roaring bluster was gone. He looked down at his big calloused hands. His eyes fell upon the letter he had written.

"I guess you got me, Smith," he said.

But the Swede didn't move. He sat wagging his head. "That night a week ago when you rode into our camp, the boys told me I oughtn't trust you, Smith. I don't know what kept them from killin' you. They figgered you was a lawman. I spose you been trailin' me, eh, Smith?"

Doby Smith nodded. "Who's the big boss, Swede? You'll get off easier if you confess everything."

The Swede's eyes thinned. He said slowly, "Squealin' is something I never done on nobody, Smith . . . not even a snake!"

"You'll talk!"

But something told Smith he was wrong. At the point of his gun he guided the Swede out of the shack to his horse. The Swede stuffed his letter inside his shirt. Smith's own mount was nearby, half hidden in the high brush. Mounting, he turned his prisoner toward the mouth of the basin. They were almost there when they heard the rider coming through the brush toward them.

Smith stopped, keeping the Swede covered. The big outlaw opened his mouth to yell. Smith's pistol barrel arced down

against the Swede's head, stunning him. As the Swede toppled from the back of his rearing horse, Smith hipped around in the kak to see Frio Ganz burst through the brush, thirty feet away.

All in one lightning move Frio Ganz reined in and drew, cursing in amazement. With speed born of desperation Smith flung himself from the saddle and fired. He hit the ground and rolled as Ganz's quick shot kicked up sand in his face. Then in a moment of panic, Ganz was whirling his horse, roaring away, clutching his bullet-nicked shoulder.

"I'll get you, Smith!" he shrilled.

He was lost to view by the time Smith regained his feet. The Swede was staggering to his feet, his eyes afire with hate. The sounds of Frio Ganz's running horse were fading.

"Damn you, Smith!" the Swede gritted. "You'll never get away with this. My boys will tear your damned jail apart to get me out!"

"Your boys don't think that much of you, Swede!" Smith snapped. "I don't want to kill you, but if it's necessary that's what I'll do. This is Texas, not Mexico. Your Border-hoppin' days are over, Swede. Now that I know where your hangout is I'll nail your crew one by one. Now play nice!"

The Swede offered no protest. Under Smith's gun, he rode like a doomed man, his haunted eyes staring straight ahead, until they came to a brushy ledge overlooking the basin. There Smith bound his prisoner's wrists and ankles with rawhide and laid him in the shade.

The scorching sun rose higher in the cloudless sky. Smith lay flat at the edge of the rim, staring down through the heat waves at the small basin. Hunger gnawed his belly. Every muscle of his saddle-hardened body ached from the rigors of the past week. At last he had the Swede. Now if he could grab off some of the bunch, he'd feel that his job was done.

As the long hot afternoon dragged, thirst deviled the two men, but neither of them complained. No sign of a rider did Smith see enter the basin. When purple evening shadows began spreading across the basin, he said: "We'll go now, Swede."

"Into Wagon Gap?"

"Yes."

Smith tied the Swede's hands to the saddle-horn and used his rope to lead the prisoner's horse. They rode down to the mouth of the basin and turned north. Darkness found them at the edge of the badlands. In another hour Smith pulled upon a rim that overlooked Ladino Basin. To their right lay Ladino Pass—a wide gap in the hills that led to the river. Yonder, ahead of them, the lights of Wagon Gap twinkled like tiny fireflies in the darkness.

"Think they'll hang me, Smith?" the Swede asked.

Smith shrugged coldly, his face impassive.

Smith had every reason in the world to hate the Swede. Because of the raids of the Swede's bunch, he faced ruin. He had suffered heavier beef losses from rustling because his outfit lay near Ladino Pass. Yet there was something about this hard-bitten oldster that got under his hide. The elation he'd expected in nabbing the Swede wasn't there.

A WEEK ago, when Doby Smith had decided to take the Swede's trail, he'd called a meeting of the Ladino Basin cowmen in the rear room of the Green Lantern Saloon. Those cowmen, hard hit by the drouth, hit harder by rustling, were willing to listen to any plan that meant salvation.

"It's the Swede an' his hellion crew doin' it, gents," Smith had said grimly. "The Pass is too big for us to put up guards. We strung a fence to block them, an' they tore it down. Now I'm goin' to

try my plan. You gents set tight till you hear from me. Here's my plan . . . ."

When Smith left the meeting that night, Sheriff Chuck Malone followed him outside. Malone was about Smith's own age, a red-headed young gent who'd tried every means he knew to halt the rustling plague—and had failed. He and Doby Smith had been pards for years.

"All I can say is good luck, cowboy," Malone said grimly. "Fetch the Swede in by the tail an' you'll collect a thousand bucks bounty. Every jigger in his pack has got head-money on him. Smash that bunch, an' there'll be peace in this strip of hell. I've rode the seat off my pants an' got nowhere. Don't worry about Banker Bartlett grabbin' your ranch while you're gone. If he asks me to serve an evacuation notice, I'll stall."

That night Doby Smith had crossed the River. Luck alone had guided him to the Swede's camp the next day. And sheer cold nerve, as well as bluff, had saved him in that first meeting.

He posed as an outlaw on the dodge. He expected to find the Swede a swaggering, surly killer. Instead, he had found an oldster, hard-bitten and tough, yes; but a leader whose power over his men was fast waning . . . .

Now Smith hardly knew why he took the back way into the cowtown of Wagon Gap. He rode up in the brush at the rear of the 'dobe jail, helped the Swede dismount.

The main street was all but deserted. Saddled horses stood at the hitch-pole in front of the Green Lantern Saloon. Beyond the center of town the small 'dobe homes stood one after the other.

Sheriff Chuck Malone was just preparing to leave his office when Smith entered with his prisoner. The red-headed lawman stopped dead, grinning his welcome, barely glancing at the Swede.

"Well, I'll be wamned!"

"Same to you!" Smith retorted.

As their hands clasped the lawman said: "Get the Swede, cowboy?"

Smith shook his head. "Guess I failed, Chuck," he said strangely.

Smith knew that the Swede was staring at him. "He's a prisoner, but not the one I want," Smith explained. "I'll tell you a lot of things later. In the meantime lock him up. I'll prefer charges later. Quit grinnin', you sorrel-topped idiot, an' do as I say!"

Sheriff Malone locked up the big outlaw in an empty cell. His flow of questions brought evasive answers from Smith. In the lawman's eyes Smith saw a gnawing worry that he couldn't hide. It wasn't at all like Chuck Malone to worry.

"The cowmen are holdin' their weekly meetin' over at the saloon, Jim," he admitted soberly. "Things have been too quiet since you been gone. My guess is that hell's goin to pop, an' I'm helpless. Banker Bartlett aims to foreclose on every note he's got. The cowmen are packin' their guns an' Bartlett hired two tough jiggers with tied-down six-shooters as bodyguards. Legally he can foreclose, all right—but the minute he starts it there'll be war!"

SMITH left the sheriff's office and made for the saloon. The town was still quiet, gripped by a tension that Smith felt now. He noticed a light still burning in the bank window. Banker Link Bartlett's buckboard and team stood out in front the horses switching their tails.

The barkeep and a couple of townsmen were at the bar when Smith entered. He nodded to them, then headed for a door at the rear. From back of that portal came the mutter of talk, the scrape of boots on the floor, the jingle of spurs.

When Smith opened the door he found seated there eight of the biggest cowmen in Ladino Basin. Their harrassed eyes searched Smith's lean face as they clumped

to their feet. Then they were gripping his hand, firing questions. Among them were Bruce Armstrong and Ed Cahill, strong, self-reliant men.

Admitting failures was hard to do before these men. But Smith forced himself to do it. Bloodshed and ruin faced them—the loss of their ranches. Each man here had borrowed from Bartlett to tide him over the drouth. The drouth had persisted, month after month. These men had seen their cattle die. Now, with their backs to the wall, they were desperately trying to find a way out.

Smith knew that if they were told the Swede was in jail, no power on earth could stop them from taking him out and hanging him. So he said: "The Swede's bunch is still on the loose, gents. Each of us will have to guard our own herd from here out."

He saw the bitter disappointment come into the eyes of these men who were his neighbors. But a greater threat held them now. Bruce Armstrong, grizzled owner of the Slash-A, cleared his throat.

"You done as much as any one man could have done, Jim. That we know. If Bartlett does as he's threatenin' it won't matter a damn if we are rustled blind. Rumor is that he's goin' to import gunmen to back up his back-stabbin' law. Sheriff Malone has told him to go to hell. When we made them last loans six months ago he said he'd ride through the drouth with us. Now he's demandin' his money."

Before Doby Smith left the meeting he said: "Go back to your ranches. Let Bartlett make the first move. When he does, we'll fight!"

CHAPTER THREE

While the Gallows Waits

ALONE, Smith walked out of the saloon and paused on the dark walk to build a smoke. Then he headed down the street toward the bank. A jangling uneasiness touched his nerves as he mounted the bank steps and tapped on the locked door.

Footsteps sounded inside. A man's muffled voice said sharply: "Who is it and what do you want?"

"Jim Shannon, Bartlett. Open up. I want to talk to you."

The lock made a clinking sound and the door opened. Link Bartlett stood framed against the light inside; a tall, sunken-cheeked man with piercing gray eyes that matched the pallor of his skin. The chill unfriendliness of this banker who, after five years, had the basin cowmen at his mercy, fired Jim Shannon with bitter resentment which was written plainly across his features.

In his grating voice Bartlett said: "I was working late over my books, Shannon. If it's business you came to see me about, come in. If it's to argue, your talk will get you nothing."

Jim Shannon bridled his temper. "Let's go back to your office, Bartlett. I want to talk to you."

Then, scowling and suspicious, Link Bartlett grudgingly held the door wider as Shannon entered. In the paneled office at the rear, Bartlett seated himself behind a huge flat-topped desk. A sneering smile touched his lips as his colorless eyes looked up at the tall cowpuncher facing him across the desk.

"You've been out of town, I hear, Shannon—"

"That's not what I came in see you about, Bartlett. You've been in Wagon Gap five years, loanin' money at a high rate of interest, bleedin' the life-blood out of a range that you call home. You're not a Texan, Bartlett, or you'd understand better the men you're dealin' with. Legally, you can foreclose on my Leanin' S an' two others that I know of. But when you do, you'll be askin' for bloodshed."

Bartlett's eyes gleamed. "I've heard

that before, but I'm not worrying, Shannon. Business is business with me, and that's what this is. I want either my money, or the land that was mortgaged. If I have to call in the Rangers and hire an army of gunmen to uphold the law, that's what I aim to do."

"I owe you eight hundred, Bartlett—"

"Better than a thousand now, Shannon!" the banker said coolly, "including the back interest. Now if that's all you have to say I'll see you to the door."

He rose, smiling mockingly, a hard specimen inside and out. And Jim Shannon stemmed the wild urge to smash his fist against those grinning lips.

For an instant, Bartlett's eyes flicked past him toward the outer door, and cold tides of warning poured through Shannon. He turned fast to see two gun-hung men lounging against one of the cages just inside the bank. Hard-faced men, they were, with the indelible stamp of killers.

The tall one—the man with a cold cigarette dangling from his lower lip said: "The boss says the confab is over, Shannon."

Wordlessly, Jim Shannon walked out the front door, his lean face pale and drawn as he heard the bank door slam shut and lock behind him. Then he froze as the figure of a man darted out of the shadows toward him. It was Sheriff Chuck Malone. And Shannon knew the loyal red-head had been watching, listening through the front window, primed for trouble in case it broke.

They started down the dark walk together. Chuck Malone said: "I had a talk with your prisoner."

"What did he say?" Shannon asked quickly.

"Not much—except that he wanted to see you. Alone, he said. Funny-actin' old codger. I've seen him ride in an' out of town for years. Who is he, Jim?"

"The Swede."

CHUCK MALONE stopped, stunned. He started to laugh, but it was one of those things that dies before it is born. "You're plumb crazy, Jim!"

"No, Chuck. He's really the Swede—the Border-hoppin', rustlin' hellion that we've been tryin' to nab for years."

"Good Lord, cowboy! There's a thousand dollars—"

"Which I don't want, Chuck, if it means seein' that old hellion hang. I rode with him an' his bunch for a week, darin' their pay-off lead, even joinin' them in tryin' to rob a Mex train. An' he's what I found. Let me handle things in my own way, Chuck. An' you keep a tight lip an' say nothin'."

"Well, I'll go to hell!"

"You may have company, Chuck," Shannon said softly, and went inside the jail alone.

The Swede was the only inmate along the row of cells at the rear of the building. He was standing at the cell door, gripping the iron bars with hopeless resignation. From outside came the rumble of hoofbeats as the cowmen rode back to their ranches.

The Swede fumbled inside his shirt and produced the letter he had written at his shack. He poked it through the bars and said: "I wish you'd mail it for me, Smith. Don't guess I'll get a chance now. Only I guess your real name ain't Smith, is it?"

"No, Swede. Doby Smith is the handle I used when I joined your bunch. My real name is Jim Shannon."

The Swede started, staring hard. "Owner of the Leanin' S outfit in the basin?" he asked queerly.

"Yes."

The Swede's eyes lowered. He started to say something, then changed his mind. "Funny," he mused. "Funny . . . ."

As Jim Shannon turned to leave he unconsciously glanced at the envelope. It was addressed to a Bill Peterson in St. Louis, Missouri. He stuffed it into the

pocket of his denims. Outside he found Sheriff Malone waiting for him.

"The two horses we rode in on are back of the jail, Chuck," he said. "I'm goin' to grab a bite to eat, then head out for the ranch."

As he started to cross the street the night stage rolled into town. Men came out of the porch of the Cattlemen's Hotel as the stage creaked to a halt in front. The driver leaped to the ground, bawling orders to the men unloading the baggage at the rear, whooping greetings. Two hostlers held the bridles of the prancing mules. A dog barked as the passengers began unloading.

Shannon paid little heed to the confusion as he drew near. One of the passengers, he noticed, had all the earmarks of a gambler. Another passenger, a girl, stood near the rear of the stage, a carpetbag at her feet. She was peering from face to face, anxious and a little frightened.

In the shaft of light that came through the hotel doorway, Shannon stopped. He hardly knew why. The girl was looking at him. He moved closer to her, lifting his hat, and she took a hesitant step nearer. In that moment neither of them was conscious of the turmoil about them. Something trim and lovely about this girl that held Shannon.

"I—maybe you can help me," she began.

"Lookin' for some one?"

"Yes—my father. I thought maybe I might find him in town. I suppose I'd know him if I were to see him. He didn't know I was coming, or I know he'd have met me. I meant to surprise him."

SHE flushed and smiled, and Shannon felt a strange tremor pass through him. He had always been shy of girls—too busy ramroding the ranch his father had left him to pay them much attention. But he felt no embarrassment now, rather a protective urge filled him, and a stronger emotion he couldn't analyze. Her beauty was arresting. A tiny bonnet only partially hid her dark curls. Every fibre of her lithe body breathed of courage and strength that stirred Shannon's quickening interest.

"I'll be glad to drive you to wherever you want to go," he said.

"Well—" she murmured hesitantly.

"Or first I might ask you to eat with me at the restaurant yonder. That's where I was headin'. Hungry?"

She laughed softly. "Half starved," she admitted.

Shannon picked up her carpetbag, escorted her across the dusty street to the restaurant.

"I never dreamed Texas was like this," she smiled, when they had settled themselves in a booth. "You see, I've spent all my life back East."

They talked of trivial things after that. Their eyes met, and they both knew that something was happening to them. It came all of a sudden, like things do in the desert country. Shannon for the first time momentarily dismissed the grimmer thoughts that had held him. For the first time in weeks he laughed a little. He liked the level honesty and trust in her dark eyes and the quiet way she talked.

He said: "You haven't even told me your name yet."

"Nancy—Nancy Peterson. My father's John Peterson."

"That's funny."

"Dad's been in Texas for years. I guess, though, he's only been here in Wagon Gap the last year. You've heard of the Leaning S ranch, haven't you?"

"Sure."

"That's dad's outfit," she said proudly.

Shock poured through Shannon. With his pulses hammering, his mind groping, he quickly glanced down so she would not read his thoughts. And in a wistful low voice she hurried on.

"See, Dad was in Texas when mother died back in St. Louis. I was a baby, and

my brother Bill was just a little fellow. Dad always said he'd send for us when he got located. Mother always said his whole heart and soul were wrapped up in being a rancher. He wrote from Mexico part of the time. He must have had an awful struggle for a while. Then he began sending us money and telling us he'd send for us when he got things straightened around at the ranch. Bill meant to come out and surprise him with a visit, but—" her voice dropped to a whisper—"Bill died a month ago. I came in his place . . . ."

The truth stabbed at Shannon then, leaving him shaky and weak inside. He remembered the letter inside his pocket, the haunted look in the Swede's eyes when he had handed it to him to mail. The Swede had been sending money back to Nancy that she might have the things in life other girls had; from money that he had gained by rustling!

"I can only stay with dad two weeks," Nancy was saying. "Then I'll have to go back and finish my schooling, I guess." She paused to say shyly: "You haven't told me your name."

"Jim Shannon."

"You're new around here?"

Shannon laughed quietly, and even afterward, he never knew exactly why he said what he did. "No, Nancy. I work out at the Leanin' S—for your father. When you called him by his name it kinda startled me, I reckon. We always call him the Old Man, like they do on ranches."

Shannon forced a grin he didn't feel when he saw the happiness flood her eyes. He cursed himself for a fool when he fully realized what he had done. Yet there was no turning back now. He told her that John Peterson was in town tonight —probably in one of the stores.

"Then he can go back out to the ranch with us?" Nancy cried eagerly.

"Sure," said Shannon.

He ate but little of the food that was brought them. His appetite was gone. Half-way through the meal he told Nancy he'd go fetch her father.

"You wait here, Nancy," he told her, and paid the check.

Steely fingers seemed to be wrenching at his heart as he strode outside. Deceit had never been a part of his make-up. And now that the full shock of what he was doing came to him, he felt cheap and small.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death-Doomed Basin

SHANNON hurried across the street to the jail office, and found Sheriff Chuck Malone leaning in the doorway, smoking. The stage rumbled past, heading for the corrals at the edge of town. Malone had seen Shannon escort the girl into the restaurant.

"Bartlett an' his two gunmen just rode past, Jim," the lawman said softly. "Thought you might be interested."

Shannon nodded. Then he said, "Come inside, Chuck—an' close the door. I want to talk to you."

In the lamplit front office Shannon tore open the sealed letter that the Swede had given him. His eyes played over the message.

When he looked up, Malone said: "You're pale as a ghost, Jim."

"I asked you to keep a tight lip a while ago, Chuck," Shannon said gravely. "That still stands. Read this. Then turn the Swede over to me." He shoved the crumpled note into the staring lawman's hand.

Malone read it, frowning, puzzled. "I don't sabe, Jim—"

"You will, Chuck. In the meantime burn the letter an' do as I say. Dad was a gambler or he'd never have owned the Leanin' S. He claimed to be a judge of

horses an' men. I may be neither. But I'm goin' to give the Swede a chance—something maybe he's never had before."

"You're dealin' with a bad hombre, Jim."

"There's a damned thin line between a good man an' a bad one, Chuck!" Shannon snapped. "Now burn that note."

He reached the Swede's cell door to find the big outlaw seated on his bunk, his head in his hands. He rose and shambled to the door.

"Is your real name John Peterson, Swede?" Shannon asked.

It took a long time for the Swede to nod his head.

"You have a son named Bill, an' a daughter called Nancy?"

The Swede's eyes were suddenly those of a dead man. "I have a boy named Bill," he said huskily, "an' the baby's called Nancy."

"Bill is dead, Swede. An' Nancy is no longer a baby. She must be twenty or better."

"You wouldn't lie to me would you—Shannon?"

"No, Swede. Nancy arrived tonight on the stage."

It didn't seem to make sense to the Swede at first. Then his great body began to sag and he stared, speechless. The very foundation of his hopes and wild dreams were like rotten timbers suddenly swept away by a desert flood.

"Nancy," he said. "Nancy . . . ."

THEN Shannon's low voice lashed out at him. "I read your letter, Swede. I've met Nancy an' had quite a talk with her. She's fine an' good; as straight as you've been crooked an' rotten. All these years you've lived a filthy lie to her. You've led her to believe that my Leanin' S ranch is yours. An' I didn't have the guts to tell her different. By the letters you've sent her, Swede, she thinks you're about the greatest, whitest gent—"

"Well, tell her the truth, damn you!" the Swede blurted hoarsely.

"No, Swede!" Shannon gritted. "I'm goin' ahead an' let you live your rotten lie—for her sake! She's only goin' to be here for a couple of weeks. Durin' that time you're goin' to be John Peterson, owner of the Leanin' S. You're goin' to get your guns back. You're goin' to be free—with all the God-given chance to live like the man she thinks you are. I'll fix it so the folks around here won't know what's happenin'. Nobody knows you're the Swede in Wagon Gap. That's all, Swede. Play your part an' do it right. An' if you make a single wrong move I'll shoot you like I would a snake. All right, Chuck—unlock the door an' give him his guns!"

Sheriff Chuck Malone muttered: "I know you're crazy now, Jim. Plumb loco."

"Maybe you're right. But do as I say, Chuck."

When the cell door swung open, John Peterson walked out with the lumbering stride of an old man. In the front office he pouched the guns that Chuck Malone handed him. He looked at Shannon a little dazed.

"You're a funny feller, Shannon," he said.

"I could have told you that an hour ago, Peterson," Malone said coldly. "He'd trust a rattlesnake till the thing bit him. But in your case I wouldn't bite if I was you. I taken a hand in this game an' I aim to see it played straight."

They went outside, just Shannon and the Swede, whose name was John Peterson, and who had been living a lie. There was no one along the night-gloomed street to see them. Shannon was glad to find the restaurant deserted, except for Nancy and the Chink proprietor.

Nancy left the booth when she saw the two men enter. She moved towards them slowly, her eyes bright with unshed tears,

the strain of her emotions withheld. And the Swede watched her as he had never watched anything before. A strange softness transfigured his face, for in Nancy he saw the image of the lovely woman who had been his wife.

He barely whispered her name.

Then with a half-sob she rushed to him. His great arms encircled her when she kissed his bearded cheek. They were still standing that way, when Shannon turned back to the door.

"I'll get a buckboard for you, John," he said.

In a few minutes he was back with a hired buckboard, his own mount tied to the rear of the rig. He had stabled the Swede's horse.

John Peterson and Nancy came out to meet him, Nancy was laughing and crying at the same time. They climbed into the rig and Peterson took the reins, with Shannon riding ahead of them out of the quiet town. They took the brush-hemmed wagon road that angled across the basin. Above the drum of hoofs Shannon heard Nancy and her father talking, but he was unable to discern what they said.

On a shelf at the toe of the hills he made out the scattered buildings of the Leaning S ranch. Two miles beyond, Ladino Pass formed a low saddle in the hills. From a nearby sink came the moan of thirsty cows, a plaintive sound that sawed at Shannon's nerves.

SHANNON was first to wheel up in the ranch yard. He hurried into the house and lit some lamps in the front room. Nancy soon followed him. She paused in the doorway, her cheeks flushed with excitement, scanning the huge room with its fire place and old-fashioned furniture.

"Like it, Nancy?" Shannon asked, smiling.

"It's — it's wonderful, Jim," she breathed tremulously. "It's just like I had it pictured."

Peterson was waiting for Shannon out near the rig. His face was a study of disbelief, joy and wonder.

"You'll take the back bedroom, Peterson," Shannon snapped guardedly. "That used to be dad's. I'll be in the room adjoining it. Give Nancy the side room. Don't stand there starin'. Go on in, an' act your part."

Peterson said nothing as he went into the house carrying Nancy's carpet-bag. Two sleepy-eyed cowboys heard Shannon as he drove the buckboard toward one of the sheds. They came out of the bunkhouse—two crochety, loyal oldsters who had fought at Shannon's side through drouth and black-leg to keep the ranch going.

Shannon avoided their questions. They hadn't seen him for a week. The rustling had stopped during the time he was gone, they reported. When the horses were cared for they followed Shannon inside the bunkhouse. There, in the glow of a lantern, Shannon looked at his men.

"Those folks I unloaded at the house are John Peterson and his daughter, Nancy. Until I tell you otherwise, Peterson is the boss here an' I'm the foreman. The Leanin' S belongs to Peterson, sabe? If anybody comes around askin' questions, you're to shake your head an' walk away."

Badger Gates' whiskered lower jaw dropped. "You been drinkin', Jim?"

"Not yet. But I may start when this is all over."

Tall, rawboned Buff Welton looked like a scarecrow in his nightshirt and boots. "Bartlett ain't crowdin' you into some skunk-stinkin' deal is he, Jim?" he asked.

"Bartlett has nothin' to do with this, boys," Shannon told them. "Remember what I said, an' play your cards belly close."

Shannon went out, leaving the two oldsters gaping. When he entered the house again, Peterson was in the front room

alone. Sounds from the side bedroom told Shannon that Nancy was in there unpacking.

"The boys and me will start diggin' a new tank at the mouth of Diablo Draw in the mornin'," he said. "It's goin' to rain one of these days an' we'll need all the water we can catch."

"I'll be with you," Peterson said slowly.

Shannon slept but little that night. The same trouble that filled his spirit obsessed his dreams. He awoke once to ponder a future that looked black . . . .

Shortly after daylight sounds from the kitchen awakened him. He dressed quickly, went into the kitchen to find Nancy busy cooking breakfast. She was wearing a bright gingham dress; she looked fresh and rested.

"In a man's kitchen a woman can't find anything," she said lightly. "But I'm finding my way around. Dad's out on the porch, Jim."

Shannon joined Peterson. The oldster was more gaunt than ever, and the hungry, haunted look was shown in his deep-set eyes, but he tried to hide it when they went in to breakfast. There was no noticeable strain when Shannon called in the two cowboys to eat with them. Their greetings were short, gruff, as cowhand greetings usually are.

After the meal the men tromped out to the corral. Snuffy broncs were topped. Peterson rode at Shannon's side to the mouth of Diablo Draw. There all four men worked under the brassy sun with shovels, building a tank. At noon Nancy drove out in a buckboard, fetching food and water.

She laughed and said: "Doesn't it ever rain?"

"It will, Nancy," Shannon said.

IT WAS hell, working in the stifling heat and dust that afternoon. The next day it was the same, but no complaint came from the men. Peterson worked like a demon, doing more than his share, saying little. In the man-killing labor he seemed to find surcease from his damning torment. He helped bury the cows that had died in the muck of a dried-up water hole. Once, when he and Peterson were alone, Shannon pointed out the remains of his herd. There were only about two hundred head in the bunch, their bony ribs showing the effect of the drouth.

"That's all I have left, Peterson," Shannon said grimly. "They'll be dead in another week or so if it don't rain. When they're gone I'm ruined."

"Drouths are hell," Peterson said indifferently.

Shannon couldn't sabe Peterson's strange actions. He sensed in the oldster the same gnawing feel of disaster that roweled him. The men's tempers grew short. The heat became intolerable, even at night. The stifling breeze seemed to whisper of impending doom which hovered over the head of the rancher.

Shannon found it hard to keep on with the lie he was living. On the third night Bruce Armstrong rode up. Shannon met him at the front gate.

In a dead flat voice Armstrong muttered: "Banker Bartlett was over to see me this evenin', Jim. I s'pose he'll pay you a visit tonight. He's callin' in the Rangers to evacuate us. He's givin' us three days to clear out. There'll be some killin's soon."

"We'll have to wait an' see, Armstrong," Shannon said.

ARMSTRONG hadn't been gone more than an hour when Banker Link Bartlett drove up in his buckboard. His two sneaking-eyed gunmen were with him, astride sweaty horses. Shannon met them far enough away from the house so their voices wouldn't carry.

"I've told the other cowmen, Shannon," Bartlett said coldly. "An' I'm telling you

now: You've got three days to pack up your personal belongings and get out."

"When you come to move us out, Bartlett," Shannon said softly, "you'd best fetch along plenty of guns. More than these two seedy pole-cats. You'll need them."

"Threatening me, eh?" Bartlett rasped.

"Just tellin' you, Bartlett."

Fuming, the banker whipped his team around and started back towards town, his two gunmen trailing. And as Shannon turned he saw a shadow move around the house. He recognized the figure as Peterson.

CHAPTER FIVE

Badman's Gamble

NANCY was in the kitchen when Shannon entered the house. He went straight to his room. Some time later he heard the front door open and close, and knew it was Peterson. After that a heavy silence settled over the house.

Utterly depressed, unable to sleep, Shannon got up at midnight, dressed, and made his way through the dark house to the front porch. He was building a smoke when a slight rustling sound made him whirl. Nancy stood facing him, her eyes dark pools in her pale face.

"I couldn't sleep either, Jim," she whispered. "It's so hot."

"It'll rain soon. That'll cool things off."

They sat down together on the edge of the porch. She smoothed out her long skirt. From out of the darkness came the distant moan of cattle. Nancy's hand happened to touch him, and emotion flamed through him. It suddenly occurred to Shannon that Nancy had been constantly on his mind. Bitterly he condemned himself for the deception he was playing. If things had been different . . . .

"I'll soon have been here a week, Jim," she murmured.

A week! Peterson was to meet his outlaw bunch at the shack at the end of a week, Shannon remembered. He remained silent.

"I'll be leaving one of these days. I think it's best." She looked at him then, her lips trembling. "Jim . . . what's the matter? What's wrong with dad? Something is happening. I feel it. I see it in your eyes."

"It's the drouth, Nancy. Seein' cattle die does things to men."

Shannon rose, flipping away his cigarette. Nancy stood facing him, a prey to the same electrical spell. Neither of them seemed to breathe as some magnetic power drew them. Then she was in his arms, giving him her lips, her lithe body trembling in his embrace. And as he released her he saw in her eyes all the unvoiced loyalty, promise and devotion that a good woman can give a man.

He stood a moment, shaken. "I had no right to do that, Nancy," he said.

With a low sob she fled back into the house, and Shannon returned to his room, to be deviled by all that had happened. Later that night, heat-lightning flamed across the dark heavens. Over the peaks the faint rumble of thunder echoed over the brooding basin like a mocking dirge. The heat was unbelievable.

Dawn was cloudy, stifling hot and threatening rain. There was a forced cheerfulness about Nancy that failed to hide her anxiety. Peterson was strangely silent, grimmer, and wore a tortured look in his eyes. It seemed to Shannon that he had aged the past few days. But he still tried to keep up a front when Nancy was around.

AFTER breakfast, Shannon sent the two Leaning S cowboys back to work on the dirt tank. When they were gone he found Peterson in one of the sheds, absently mending a bridle.

"I'm makin' a call on Banker Bartlett,

Peterson," Shannon said grimly. "I'd like for you to go with me. Folks in town don't know you. Sometimes it pays to play it bold."

So Peterson reluctantly rode into Wagon Gap with Shannon that morning. On the way he kept staring straight ahead, his jaws clamped.

"Nancy's happiness means more to me than anything in the world, Shannon," he said slowly. "So far, she ain't caught on. I'd do anything to keep her from knowin' now."

"There's no reason why she should ever know, Peterson," Shannon said bitterly. "In another week you can send her back to St. Louis. When she's gone you can write an' tell her you've sold out. An' you can carry on the rotten lie you're livin'."

In town, Peterson stayed with the horses outside the bank when Shannon went in. Shannon wasted no words with the banker. His voice was hard when he explained his plan.

"You're a banker, Bartlett—not a rancher. I take it you'd still rather have the money due you than to foreclose. I've still got about two hundred head alive. If you'll give me two weeks I'll trail them up to Sanderson. Bein' off season, it'll mean a sacrifice. But that way you'll get your money. If I get through all right the other cowmen can do the same."

"Why didn't you think of that before, Shannon?" Bartlett grinned coldly.

Shannon checked his flaming temper. "We didn't think it would be necessary, Bartlett. We took you at your word. You said you'd ride through the drouth with us."

The banker's retort was never uttered. He was staring beyond Shannon, looking at the big figure of Peterson outside with the horses.

"Who's that with you, Shannon?" he asked.

"A friend of mine."

Bartlett's face was gray as his eyes. "I'll give you my answer some time today," he growled.

Shannon strode outside and he and Peterson rode back to the ranch without a word.

That afternoon Peterson rode away from the house. Shannon reckoned the oldster was going to the tank to work. But later, when Shannon joined his two men at the tank, Peterson wasn't there. Nor had the men seen him.

Under threatening skies, Sheriff Malone joined Shannon at the tank that evening. When they were alone, the redheaded lawman said: "I heard about the proposition you made Bartlett, Jim. You're makin' a helluva mistake to trust Peterson. He's playin' a snake game, or I'm no reader of sign! On the way out I met him an' some tough-lookin' little jigger partin' company along the trail. When Peterson saw me, he bolted like a sheep-killin' coyote."

"Maybe you're lookin' for the worst in Peterson, Chuck."

"By God, I know a wolf when I see one!" the lawman snapped angrily, and rode away.

SHANNON sent his men on back to the ranch. Just as night fell, threatening and black, he rode in alone. Icy fingers of dread touched his nerves when he glimpsed Bartlett's buckboard in the yard. The two gunmen sat their horses in the darkness nearby.

With no word to them, Shannon lit down as Bartlett came out the front door. Heart hammering, Shannon stopped. Through the open doorway he saw Nancy standing in the front room, frightened and pale.

"I just drove out to tell you, Shannon," Bartlett said smoothly, "that I'll accept your proposition. Come in tomorrow and we'll talk it over."

Shannon went hot and cold by turns as

Bartlett climbed into his rig and drove away with his men. Quickly he strode into the house. Nancy's eyes were stark and wide.

"What did he say to you, Nancy?" Shannon asked tightly.

"It wasn't what he said, Jim. It was the way he looked at me—and smiled. He asked me all about dad—"

She caught her breath. Sounds of diminishing hoof-beats came to them, soon fading. Shannon hurried out to the bunkhouse and found his two hands alone, grumbling disconsolately.

"What the hell's goin' on around here, Jim?" Badger wanted to know.

"Where's Peterson?" Shannon rapped.

"That's just it! Peterson just skittered out of the shadows next to the house, spurrin' towards town!"

Shannon raced to his horse, flung astride, and along the brush-flanked wagon road he roared toward town. Rumbling thunder grew louder, mingling with the pound of hoofs. Distrust for Nancy's father rose up in Shannon. The oldster's queer actions gave every indication of him playing a treacherous game. Once an outtrailer always one, Chuck Malone had cynically maintained.

Lights of Wagon Gap leaped up in the night ahead. Shannon paid little attention to the activity along the street. In front of the sheriff's office he lit down. He noticed Bartlett's buckboard in front of the bank as he barged into the jail.

"Chuck!" he called guardedly.

"Back here, Jim," Malone's voice came from the rear of the jail. "Come quick!"

Shannon ran down the gloomy corridor, past the empty cells. In the darkness at the back of the building he found Malone standing at a barred window.

"Too late, Jim. Your outlaw pard just pulled up behind the bank an' was admitted through the rear door. Now do you believe in snake tracks when you see them?"

"Give 'em hell, Peterson, we're comin'!" Shannon yelled.

Shannon gritted: "Come on!"

With the red-head at his heels he hurried out the front door, circled through the darkness to the rear of the jail. Then in long strides they made for the bank. They saw Peterson's horse standing with trailed reins off in the brush.

With breath tight-held, Shannon flattened against the wall of the bank, motioning to Malone. They edged closer to the back door that stood slightly ajar. From behind that portal came Link Bartlett's harsh voice. And Shannon froze, his brain in seething turmoil.

"I was expecting you, Swede. I told Ganz to get word to you. The game you and Shannon was playing on your daughter is over. You mighta known you could never get away with it. You've got her thinking you're a fine upright rancher, Swede. She doesn't know I've got enough on you to hang a dozen men."

"What you want, Bartlett?" Peterson asked in a strained voice.

THE banker's slender fingers drummed on his desk-top. "The bunch is waiting for you in Ladino Pass, Swede. You're

to chouse Shannon's beef herd down to them tonight. I've got a beef buyer lined up to buy them across the Border. That'll smash Shannon. He's the only one of the damned cowmen that's worried me. The others have families, and they won't fight. By tomorrow at this time the Leaning S will be in my hands. I promised to give you the ranch once—but that was before you blundered on the train holdup."

"Somebody tipped off them Mexicans," the Swede said hoarsely.

"Nobody tipped them off, Swede! Through your own damned carelessness the Rurales saw you and your bunch rambling around below the Line and got suspicious. The train officials ordered special guards that night. I got that gold shipment tip and passed it to you. We could have been in tall clover if you hadn't been such a blundering fool.

"Don't just stand there staring, Swede. I know you'd like to kill me, but you haven't got a chance. My two men are yonder in my office, watching. Start for your gun and they'll kill you .... Think a lot of that good-looking gal of yours, don't you, Swede? You'd hate like hell for her to know who you really are—and the town as well. I'm still the boss. What's your answer to running off Shannon's beef?"

"You mean Nancy will know the truth if I don't?" Peterson asked dumbly.

"You're thinkin' fast tonight, Swede," Bartlett sneered.

The word faded. The door opened, and Peterson walked to his horse like a man in a trance. For an instant Bartlett stood in the doorway. And hidden close by in the darkness, Shannon and Malone crouched.

Every fibre of Shannon's taut body screamed at him to call to Bartlett, then shoot. Now was his chance to kill the man whose sordid treachery had blighted the entire range. Yet something withheld him. And as he hesitated the bank door closed. Peterson was riding away.

"Cripes, Jim!" Malone was saying excitedly. "Let's nab Bartlett now. Then I'll round up the cowmen—"

"Bartlett will be here when we get back, Chuck," Shannon snapped. "An' there's no time to round up anybody. We've got to follow Peterson!"

CHAPTER SIX

Glory for a Rustler

MALONE'S protests went unheard as both men sprinted to their horses, and struck through a narrow lane as thunder rumbled and lightning crashed overhead. Behind the buildings they caught sight of Peterson in that flare of light, riding toward the basin. They spurred after him, keeping always a safe distance behind.

All the worry, all the torment and hopelessness of the past few days raged through Shannon. All his hopes went smash. He knew now how futile it was to ever hope that Nancy would never learn the truth. His belief that the good in Peterson overwhelmed the bad long since had given way to burning disappointment.

Through the chaos of his mind Peterson's grim words struck: "Nancy's happiness means more to me than anything in the world, Shannon. I'd do anything to keep her from knowin'."

With a start, Shannon suddenly realized that Peterson was riding for the Leaning S. As the old outlaw wheeled up near the front porch, Shannon and Malone rode up cautiously. The booming thunder deadened their movements. From the porch they heard Nancy's anxious cry to her father.

Beneath one of the wind-lashed cottonwood trees in the yard, Shannon halted. The front door of the house stood open. On the porch, in the shaft of light, Peterson stood with Nancy in his arms.

"There's nothin' wrong, Nancy," he kept repeating.

Thunder drowned what else he said. Minutes dragged.

"No, Dad, I don't want to leave, ever!" Nancy was crying. "I'd love it here—if things were right!"

"I'm glad you like him, Nancy. Jim Shannon is one of the finest gents in the world . . . ."

Then Peterson was striding to his horse and spurring away, ignoring Nancy's calls. Shannon whirled his horse, circled through the brush with Malone at his heels. They cut Peterson's trail a half mile from the house.

"Hell, Jim!" Malone yelled. "He ain't headin' into the lower pasture to pick up the herd. He's makin' straight for the Pass!"

Shannon had already noticed that. His aching eyes, probing into the black maw of the Pass ahead, saw Peterson swing over the low saddle in the hills, riding like a madman. Jagged lightning split the heavens as the storm rolled nearer.

Shannon led the way, roaring blindly into the sheer-walled Pass. Twice in that wild ride nearer the river, Shannon glimpsed Peterson ahead of him, the wind whipping his coat and hair.

Then where the Pass sloped down to the River, Shannon curbed as a man's strident bawl carried through the storm.

"That you, Swede?"

"It's me, Ganz," came Peterson's reply.

"Where's the herd?"

Peterson's raucous, booming voice lashed through the gale, deadly and mocking, as four blurry horse-backers rode out from behind boulders towards him.

"There ain't goin' to be no herd, Ganz! This is the show-down I been waitin' for you, scaly snakes. Shannon'll take care of Bartlett . . . ."

SHANNON didn't hear the rest. In that split-second thankfulness, fierce pride stormed through him in a blinding wave of emotion. His throat hurt, but at the top of his lungs he yelled: "Give 'em hell, Peterson! We're comin'!"

Guns flamed, their explosion and men's frantic yells adding to the bedlam of the

Thirst and madness and death blocked the trail to Black Valley, but Quent Spaulding struggled onward. Goaded remorselessly by memories of murder, and the desperate plea in a girl's terrified eyes, Quent crashed through the gates of hell into the doomed valley from which he knew no man returned!

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storm. And straight into that gun-bellowing inferno of death Shannon charged, riding the stirrups, his six-shooter blasting. Driven by a wild lust to smash and kill, he thundered past Peterson as the old outlaw toppled from the saddle. And right at his heels spurred Chuck Malone, giving shot for shot.

Frio Ganz screamed and fell from his rearing horse. One of the other outlaws was already down from Peterson's shots. The two remaining renegades, thunderstruck by the suddenness of the attack, whirled to flee—too late. Both of them fell as they hipped around to shoot. Then Shannon was facing the wide-eyed redhead, yelling to make himself heard.

"See that they're all dead, Chuck. Make sure."

Shannon turned back to where Peterson's figure lay beside the trail. He hit the ground running, lifted the old outlaw's head in his arms.

A new joy, a fierce pride struck through the pain in Peterson's eyes as he gasped: "I told her, Shannon. She knows—everything."

Chuck Malone wheeled up nearby. "There's four of them, Jim, an' they're dead as hell."

Shannon came to his feet. "Take care of Peterson, Chuck," he said, a choke in his voice. "Handle him easy. He's shot to doll rags. I'll send a doctor out from town."

And without waiting, Shannon was back on his horse, riding full tilt back out the Pass. He was to remember little of that hell-for-leather ride into Wagon Gap. The lashing wind whipped at his bent body. As he reloaded his gun great drops of rain splattered against his face like spent lead.

At the doctor's house at the edge of town he slid his tiring horse, hit the walk in full stride. The old medico met him at the door, lamp in one hand, his nightshirt fluttering in the wind.

"Kill your horse gettin' to my ranch, Doc! There's a man shot!"

"Who!" the medico managed.

"A white man, Doc!"

Then Shannon was racing back to his horse. He forked the saddle and the animal lunged ahead. Most of the town was dark. The buildings seemed huddled together as if in fear. The bank was without light.

The storm broke in all its fury as Shannon curbed in front of the Green Lantern Saloon. A hunch drew him toward the doors. He pushed inside, and stopped.

Amazed silence gripped the cowmen lining the bar. In the midst of them, Banker Bartlett lowered his drink with a hand that suddenly shook. His bony face drained bloodless. Stark terror bulged his eyes. The lank gunman at his side made a croaking sound, right hand dropping to his gun.

"Hold it, gunslick!" Shannon clipped, "or die with your crooked boss. You're through, Bartlett . . . ."

All of Bartlett's evil was suddenly unmasked for all to see. Like a cornered rat he screamed at his gunman; a hideout pistol flashed into his hand with amazing speed. Gun-thunder rolled across the room of yelling men. Shock, searing pain tore into Shannon's left arm as he drew and fired. The lank gunman went down, his face a bloody smear. Then through the smoke, Shannon saw his bullet bend Bartlett in the middle.

Bartlett was dead when he struck the floor. And Shannon laughed a little crazily despite his hurt. His chore was done. The barroom weaved before his eyes. He didn't hear the fitful beat of horses' hoofs outside in the stormy night.

"There's a man," he said, "I promised I'd get."

THE door burst open at his back. He turned to see his two cowboys barge in, rain-soaked and staring at the bodies

on the floor. Badger Gates was first to find his voice.

"Thank God, you're safe, Jim!" he blatted. "Bartlett's other sneakin' gunhand is out to the ranch—dead. Me'n Buff caught him slinkin' through the shadows. When we called to him, he shot first an' we finished it. He squawked as he was dyin'—admittin' that Bartlett sent him out there to bushwhack you. . . ."

The uproar and confusion meant little to Shannon. Everybody plied him with questions. Chuck Malone could give them a story that'd satisfy them, the red head was good at that.

Shannon went outside to his horse, pulled into the saddle and rode toward home. Rain drenched him, allaying the feverish throb of his wound.

He beat the cowmen out to the Leanings, and there Nancy met him on the front porch, sobbing for pure joy.

"The doctor says dad will live, Jim! But—"

"Bartlett an' his two gunmen are dead, Nancy."

Sheriff Chuck Malone was standing in the doorway. "So is the Swede, Jim—if you get what I mean. He died back yonder in the Pass."

Shannon knew full well what his pard meant. And so did Nancy. Shannon knew that peace would come to Ladino Basin. The drouth was broken. Nancy and her father would be a part of the Leaning S now. And locked in the hearts of four people would be a secret. Only they and El Dios would ever know how an aging outlaw had been at last redeemed from hell . . . .

THE END

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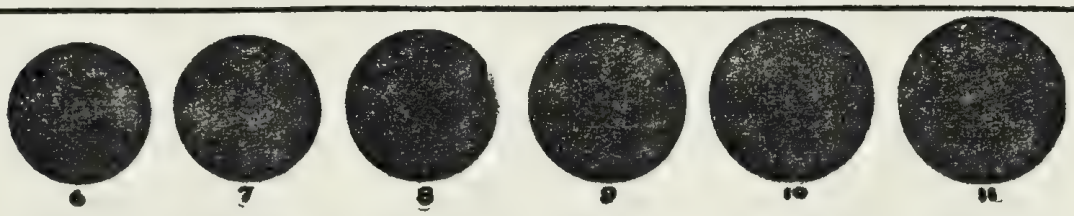


• • HOSS GREER'S

By Harry F. Olmsted

When the scalped body of Ferg Collins lay stark and still among the charred ruins of his trade wagon, the red murder sign said clearly, "Apaches!" But old Hoss Greer figured that the smoke of a war-chief's peace-pipe might weigh more than the deadly lead of unknown bushwhack guns. . . . So he baited a massacre-trap with his own body, to prove it!

CHAPTER ONE

Murder Sign!

HISTORY and legend do not always agree as to the character of Old Hoss Greer. Some of the records present a picture of a man utterly ruthless, scornful of the slow but orderly processes of law, and fiendishly lucky in invoking the unwritten law of self-defense. Legend, on the other hand, presents Hoss as a man who ever carried the torch of justice before Southwestern law was out of its swaddling clothes; a man who struck swiftly back at lawlessness with a just and terrible retribution.

MASSACRE MEDICINE

The answer was a snarl and a flash of red flame from the renegade's gun. . . .

Hoss Greer rides again, in this stirring novel of the Apache Country

Both are right . . . . and oddly wrong. Actually, Hoss never hunted trouble, nor did he ever go out of his way to avoid it. As fond of indolence as any peon of Mañana Land, he could rise to bursts of energy that defied younger, stronger men to match. Finding pleasure in minding his own business, he asked only that others do the same. Those traits were understandable. But other facts of his character seemed strangely contradictory. For example:

Hoss had been known to stand idly by, twirling his longhorn mustaches and

looking on cold-faced while some rampant bully doomed a less violent man. Once, according to legend, he had looked on while a burly Missourian beat his wife half to death. Puffing his cigarette and showing no more emotion than a granite cliff. What was in his mind as he viewed that spectacle, no man could hope to state. Maybe he knew that the woman needed a good hiding. And, in the case of a bullied weakling, perhaps he held to the theory that some men are better off dead. *Quien sabe?*

But though some range men condemned his attitude and his direct actions, the majority came to learn that he was one of the very best bulwarks against transgressors of their rights and his. Also that he was a good neighbor, kindly and slow to anger, until his rights were trampled underfoot. When he was crossed, he was hell on wheels. And he was at his worst when the rights of such few close friends as he claimed were invaded. Such affronts he took as a personal challenge, and someone suffered.

None was more bewildered by his strange complexities than tough, lawless newcomers who weighed him in the light of their past experiences. Many stories are told of men who, through failure to digest the legends of this laconic, chill-eyed cowman, threw themselves across his trail and were doomed. Hoss had been known to cross the Territory to mix in an affair involving some friend. And, with utter scorn, he had been heard to refuse aid to some neighbor who had hubbed himself a mess of trouble. All of which made no more sense to most observers than did his handling of the case of the three killers on dapple gray horses. . . .

HOSS was a little surprised to see Gil Pastime—foreman of his Bellclapper spread on Black River, come loping down to the home ranch, at Tres Alamos. For the calf tally was already under way and Hoss hired his foremen to do their jobs, and not to bring the details to him for judgment. Gil's horse showed all the signs of hard riding and the man himself walked with a saddle stiffness as he hurried to the house.

"Hoss," he said, and the cowman noted his stiffness and mental strain, "hell has broke loose in the high country."

"Sit," said Hoss. "Help yoreself to a drink, Gil." And when the weary foreman had refreshed himself: "What's up, feller? What fetches you away from yore crew?"

Gil seemed to gather himself. "Hoss, Old Ferg is dead. Ferg Dollins."

Hoss flinched, straightened in his chair. Where there is life, there's death. It wasn't that a man had passed that shocked him, and an old man at that. But Fergus Dollins was his friend, had been for years. Once a puncher in Hoss' service, the miseries had gotten him, set him afoot. And Hoss had set him up in business, running an Indian Trading Post at the forks of Screwtail Creek. Hoss had never reached the point where the passing of his old friends didn't affect him.

"Too bad," he murmured. "I'm glad you brought me word. I hadn't heard Ferg was poorly." Too well, from Gil's manner, he knew that wasn't the answer. But it was his way of maintaining calm in face of pending bad news. "Reckon now I'll have to send Old Tex Peters up there to run the place."

"Run what place?" said Gil sourly. "Nothin' left of Screwtail Post but four charred walls. She's burned out, Hoss. An' Ferg wasn't poorly. He was murdered."

"Yeah?" Hoss eyed him studiously, his eyes frosty and far-away. "Tell me about it, Gil."

"There's just a lot I don't know," said the Bellclapper ramrod, "we saw the glare of the fire when we got up before daylight, yesterday morning. I taken one of

the boys and rode over to see what was burning. Hit the Black River Road at the Postpile and found Ferg's wagon at Second Crossing. It was burned to scrap-iron and his ponies were dead. Ferg lay beside the road and there was a little life in him. We took him to the post, figgering to put him to bed and let his Mexican boy take care of him, though I didn't give him much chance with all that lead in him. But when I got to the Post, it was still smoking, burned to the sills. The Mex boy lay dead, a hundred feet from the ruins."

"Who done it?" asked Hoss tonelessly.

Gil shrugged. "There's nobody left to tell that, Hoss. Ferg came out of it for just about a minute. He mumbled something about getting gold from Potro's Apache settlement at Rattlesnake. Them Injuns are getting out some dust from one of them mountain cricks and somebody must have jumped Ferg as he drove back to'rd the Post. All he said was that three devils on dappled horses had shot him. Then he died. I took him to the ranch and notified the coroner."

Hoss nodded, stroking his jaw and staring bleakly out the window. "Three dapple grays, eh?" he muttered. "Old Chief Potro owns some dappled ponies. Bought 'em from Hez Arnold's spread, when the bank sold him out. You don't think. . . ."

"From all the sign around that wagon, Hoss, it was Injuns. Moccasin tracks and a pretty heavy looting before the fire was set. Moccasin marks showin' at the Post too."

Hoss came to his feet, with the quick nervousness that characterized him when he was aroused. "I'll go back with you, Gil," he said simply, clapped on his hat and led the way outside.

THEY rode swiftly, Hoss in silence and Gil painting a picture of steady cattle losses across the Bellclapper east line—the west boundary of the Apache Reservation. The Indians were already in their summer range and were apparently busy with forays and depredations. And that was nothing to smile away. Indian troubles were not easily settled, because of the difficulty of proof and the usual red-tape delay. Long ago, Hoss had made his peace with Potro, offering him the privilege of taking beef for his people with no obligation save to ask for it. He had considered that their friendship was secure, and he found it hard to believe that the stern old man of this White Mountain band had turned bad.

But such sign as remained around Ferg Dollins' burned wagon left Hoss in little doubt that it was the work of Apaches. And, because of the last words of Old Ferg, it looked very much like Potro and his dapple grays were responsible.

Hoss searched desperately for some faint clue on which to pin the hope that the old chief had kept faith with him. But when everything seemed to point to the guilt of the Indians, Hoss gave up. It was growing dark and he was weary.

"All right," he said, with a grim finality, "let's get over to the Bellclapper. I'll ride over and see that backslidin' Apache devil tomorrow."

"Watch out for that agent," warned Gil. "I've told him off a time or two and I don't think he likes us."

"He'll like us less," grumbled Hoss, "if Potro has killed Ferg Dollins."

CHAPTER TWO

Blotted Trails

IT WAS not a village, that pine-bordered meadow along Rattlesnake. For the Apaches do not live in villages. But there were a dozen or more brush-covered, dome-like houses strung along a quarter mile stretch. And others peeking out from the timber.

A large band of horses grazed on the flat as Hoss Greer came riding over the ridge. Save for a few children playing around the houses and a bevy of women washing clothes at the edge of the creek, the settlement seemed deserted. But when Hoss cleared the timber and rode toward the house belonging to Potro, a shrill cry lifted and men seemed to materialize from nowhere. And Hoss could feel the impact of their instant resentment.

Hot eyed and tight-lipped, they stood watching him ride in. And, though Hoss felt no fear, their attitude roused additional grimness in him. The way he read it, they were guilty and were reflecting it by sullen unfriendliness.

Hoss dismounted before the chief's hut and trailed his rein. They were edging in from all sides, mostly young Apaches who were aroused and bent on making trouble. Hoss stood easily, making it a point to look directly at each one of them, in turn. They could not meet the glance, but it didn't stop their slow advance.

"Where's Potro?" Hoss barked at them.

One laughed, brittlely, and his scorn was echoed by the rest with mirthless cackles. One shoved another, hurled him into the cowman. Hoss caught him on his extended elbow, knocking the wind out of the man. A rageful cry spewed from the young brave's throat; he backed swiftly, caught up a rock. The whole group was menacing now and Hoss dropped his hand to his gun, warning them back. Certain elders, holding their distance, smiled cynically and made no move to halt the fun. And it might have gone far, even to the point of bloodshed, had not Potro emerged from his hut, a shrill stop order on his lips.

The menacing young Apaches backed off and Hoss turned to face the wrinkled, beady-eyed, old man, who had ridden with Geronimo and whose youth had been spent in the warlike spirit at the peak of Apache glory. His pit-black eyes were steady, terribly hard, but not venomous. And Hoss looked in vain for the lights of friendship he had been used to in those eyes.

"What's the matter, Potro?" asked Hoss, relaxing, "You getting too old to control these young devils?"

"Mebby old like you, Caballo," answered the Indian. "Do the years weigh you down so you do not control your vaqueros?"

"What you mean by that?" scowled Hoss.

"In the house," grunted Potro, and stepped aside to permit Hoss' entrance.

When they were inside, sitting on the deep rugs obtained from the Post at Screwtail Creek, Hoss found his patience gone. "What did you mean, Potro, by that crack about my punchers? What's wrong?"

Potro glared at him for a full minute, then: "You gone too much, Caballo. When you stay at your rancho on Black River, there is peace between us and your promises are kept. But now—" his black eyes flashed "—your cowboys come on reservation, steal Apache ponies and mistreat our girls. Make our people very mad."

"Who did that?" barked Hoss. "Which boys?"

The chief shook his head. "Can't tell. Mebbe all; mebbe two-three. Don't know."

"Oh, you don't know?" sneered Hoss, "Because you lose some ponies and some cowpuncher annoys your women, you lay it to my ranch. And because you're mad at me, you murder my friend Ferg Dollins, rob him and then loot his post."

He saw stark surprise mirrored in the Apache's eyes. "What you say?" he grunted. "Dollins him dead?"

"Killed in his wagon, at Second Crossing. Right after he left your trading post. Plenty moccasin track around the job. Whoever did it went on and burned the

post. I reckon you wouldn't know anything about that little trick, eh?"

Potro eyed him intently for a minute, then rose and went to the entrance of the hut. His voice rang out in an extended harangue. Guttural answers were flung back and the exchange continued for several minutes. Then the chief ducked inside again, satisfaction showing at the corners of his eyes.

"No sabe," he said. "My people not know Dollins dead. Know nothing."

"Well I'll tell you something," snapped Hoss. "Before he died, Dollins laid his shooting to three men on dapple gray horses. Who's got spotted grays around here but you, Potro?"

The Indian's eyes burned. "Your vaquero got," he muttered. "They steal three pony from Potro when moon is dark."

"What makes you think it was my men?" demanded Hoss. "There ain't a dappled pony on the whole Bellclapper outfit."

"Your cowboy stealum. Apache follow tracks down to Reservation Line. Your men shoot, drive back."

"You report this to the agent?"

"Huh!" Potro grunted scornfully. "No good. Agent take time. Talk whole lot and do nothing. Potro take care of this. Catchum vaquero on dapple gray pony, killum. Buzzards eat. No have to bury. Potro speak."

HE TURNED his head away, indicating the end of the talk. Hoss rose, his eyes blazing. Potro was smart, he'd give him credit for that. There must have been some trouble during the trading with Dollins. Maybe Old Ferg had driven too close a bargain. The Indians had followed, slain and robbed him and then had gone on to loot the post. The plunder was probably cached right now in some hidden cave, and Potro was putting in his time inventing excuses and lies, calculated to throw the blame on the Bellclapper.

"Potro," said Hoss, moving toward the door. "I'm putting a thousand dollars on the head of each of them killin' riders of dapple grays. You get 'em, fetch 'em to me an' you'll draw down the cash. You savvy? But I don't expect you to bring 'em in, see? 'Cause them riders are Injuns, an' if they're dropped, it'll be a white man that does it."

"Him white man kill Dollins," rapped the chief. "Your man, Caballo. Apache bringum in mebbeso, take your money. Indian not know about Dollins, so you and your vaqueros watch out. You kill Apache, Potro take life of white man for pay. I speak."

"I hear you," said Hoss leaving the hut. "An' in my ears it sounds like war."

They glowered after Hoss as he rode away, but none of them offered him further trouble. Thinking of how they must have followed Dollins, Hoss rode with his

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 391, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again —Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 391, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

hand near his gun and his senses keyed for the first hint of ambush. He had reason to believe his caution had paid dividends when, after riding three miles, he heard the faint murmur of hoofbeats behind him. He pulled out into the brush, jerked his gun and waited. The horseman came swiftly and without caution. He flashed up, curbed his pony and called out. "Come out of the brush, Greer. I want to talk to you."

It was Johnny Taboo—Indian policeman. Johnny had been to school in Phoenix, was intelligent, level headed and had always shown an eagerness to iron out any difficulties between the cowmen and the Indians by mutual exchange of ideas and then strict cooperation, rather than through official hearings. Hoss had never looked upon the man as a friend, for Johnny didn't seem to have friends. But he held plenty respect for the quiet, efficient, young Indian.

"Hello, Johnny." Hoss was grinning, a little sheepishly, as he emerged. "I had the idea you was one of Potro's outfit, ridin' down to pick me off."

"You're wrong, Greer," said the policeman. "I came in just as you left and Potro told me what passed between you. And because I happen to know something about that affair at Screwtail Post, I rode after you."

"What do you know?"

"You know Manuel, the Mexican horse breaker, at the mouth of Cottonwood?"

"Ought to. I've hired him enough times. Father of the boy that was killed at Screwtail Post."

"Yes. Manuel had a younger boy staying with the other, while Dolls left to trade with Potro. When the trouble started, he slipped away. He got home yesterday and says that three white men killed his brother and robbed the post. They were not Indians, Greer."

"Nothin' but Injun sign around both jobs," countered Hoss. "Moccasins."

"A white man can wear moccasins, Greer."

"True," grunted Hoss, starting his pony. "You think your way an' I'll think mine. But before it's over, I'll have those three killers, an' I'll bet you a good horse, Johnny, it'll be three Apaches."

"If it turns out that way," the policeman fired after him, "remember you're dealing with wards of the government. If you run true to form and take the law into your own hands, you'll be in trouble, Greer. Remember that."

HOSS didn't look back. He rode back to the Bellclapper. That night when Gil Pastime came in, he and his young foreman had a long talk about Potro's charges of horse stealing and interference with Apache women. Gil blew up.

"He's a dirty liar," he said sourly. "There ain't a dapple gray pony in the whole Bellclapper cavvy. Nor there ain't a man on the roll that I wouldn't bet on. I know all but four or five as well as I know you. Signed on a couple Texans over in Pineknot. Took on a couple young fellers from Colorado when they dropped in an' asked for jobs. Then last week I hired a boy who rode through from over Socorro way, headin' for California. There ain't a thing to it, Hoss. Potro's pointin' the finger at us just to cover up."

At breakfast the next morning, Hoss looked the crew over, and was satisfied. A score of young, happy-go-lucky kids, full of the joy of living and without a thing on their consciences. Ever loyal to his hands, Hoss would have bet on these. And he carried this grim satisfaction away with him when he set out to pick up the trail of the killers.

Hoss was gone a week, one of the busiest and least fruitful of his life. He swung long circles about the Screwtail Post, struck a half dozen false leads and ran them down. Living as he could in the meantime, at remote ranches, at the lonely

camps of sheepherders or sleeping out, cold and hungry. It rained then, wiping out all sign. He returned to the Bellclapper at last to find Gil Pastime in a sweat.

"Am I glad to see you, Boss," he cried, as Hoss came riding in about supper time. "I just got a shot between the horns." He waved a letter. "It's from the sheriff of Apache County. He's got three of my men in jail—at the county seat."

"Jail? What for?" Hoss' mind was too full of a heavier problem to be stirred by some petty infraction of the law by three fool cowpunchers.

"What for?" echoed Gil. "For killing Old Ferg, an' that Mex kid at the Post, that's what!"

That was like a shot of bitter medicine. Time was proving Potro right. "What happened, Gil? What boys are they?" He scanned the sheriff's letter, cold faced.

"Pud Kintana an' Hozee Timmons, them two from Colorado. An' Bill McBride, from Socorro." Gil swore mournfully. "By cripes, I've said I'll never sign on hands I don't know, yet I allus do it. Men are not easy to get, especially good men. These fellers showed they was good an' I hired 'em. Now, dammit, look what happens!"

Hoss stared at him. "Good Lord, Gil, you don't think they're really guilty?"

"No? Why shouldn't I? I sent the three of 'em to work the breaks of Mingus Mountain. An' what happens? The sheriff picks 'em up in Snowflake, clear across the mountains, each one leadin' a dapple gray horse. Oh no, they ain't guilty—not much."

"Mebbeso yes an' mebbeso no," muttered Hoss laconically. "Anyhow, I'm goin' up an' see what it's all about. See you when I get back."

He switched saddles, mounted and rode away without a backward look at the dejected foreman.

CHAPTER THREE

Three Avengers

NEXT morning, at nine, Hoss Greer sat across the desk from the grim sheriff of Apache County in Johnsville. The lawman had greeted him with reserve and eyed him now with obvious disfavor.

"I've heard of you, Greer," he said, stiffly. "Of how you'll ride a hundred miles to bail out one of your boys. An', if the law won't bail him on your say-so, how you have a way of peelin' jails right off them you want sprung. Well, that won't go here, mister!"

"Reg'lar fire-breather, eh, Sheriff? Didn't say nothin' about my havin' a lashin' tail tipped with a flint point, did they? Way you talk, it's a wonder you don't arrest me for what *you* think *I'm* thinkin'!"

The sheriff scowled. "Enough of that, Greer. What you want of me? I'm a busy man an'—"

"These boys of mine carryin' loot with them, was they?" Hoss interrupted.

"Nary a thing. Which only means that they cached it."

"Or that they ain't the ones."

"Hogwash! We caught 'em with them dapples. They're as good as hung for that Screwtail Post job."

Hoss grinned icily. "Don't hang 'em, please, till I can talk to 'em, Sheriff. That stolen stuff belonged to me. I'd like to get it back if possible. I was Ferg Dollins' pardner, you know."

"No, I didn't. Well, I wouldn't trust you to talk with them boys alone." He called to the jailer who brought the three prisoners into the office, then stood in the doorway, his gun palmed. The three punchers smiled ruefully at Hoss.

Pud Kintana said: "Howdy, boss. Bet you never thought you had three such fools as us workin' for yuh, eh?"

"Remember," warned the sheriff, "any-

thing you say can be used ag'in yuh."

"How much have you told the sheriff?" Hoss asked them.

"Nary a word," growled Bill McBride. "Hell, the big windbelly never give us a chance to get a word in edgewise."

"Let's not get personal," said Hoss, noting the blood rush to the lawman's face. "Let's get this thing straight. Gil sent you fellers to Mingus Mountain. You turn up fifty miles away, leadin' three hot horses. That draws the picture of crooks, not damn fools." He looked into the eyes of each, and the reflections he saw there were certainly not killer lights. "Let's have the low-down on this, boys."

"It's like this, boss," said Pud Kintana. "We worked the breaks of Mingus for a day an' then went down to Granite Springs to camp. Sometime along in the night, three men come ridin' in there on dappled horses. They throwed down on us an' we made a fight of it. We shot it out an' they drawed the losin' end."

"Who were they?" barked Hoss.

"Injuns," said Kintana. "Apaches. After they was dead, we looked ourselfs over an' found we wasn't even hit. Up till then we'd done all right, an' we felt sorta like heroes. Then the old gold bug bit us. Them three dapples was nice horses an' we figgered we could sell 'em down here, throw a little spree an' be back onto the job with nobody the wiser. We succumbed to temptation, as the sky-pilot says, an'. . . . Well, here we are."

"An' the three Apaches?" asked Hoss.

"We piled rocks over 'em an' give 'em the most decent burial we could, without a shovel."

"A likely yarn," scoffed the sheriff, and the deputy in the doorway laughed.

"What we going to do?" flared Hoss at the lawman. "Take your word for something you know nothing of, let the evidence rot without so much as a look at it, then hang these boys for a job well done? I'm for getting the coroner an' a jury an' riding down there. You better look at it the same way, Sheriff."

The sheriff eyed him stiffly. Something in Hoss' glare made him draw into himself. He rose swiftly. "It's a lot of damn foolishness," he grumbled. "But nobody has ever said that I won't go all the way to see justice done. Mike, put cuffs on these three an' get 'em on their horses. I'll see the coroner an' join you at the stable."

WITHIN the hour, fifteen men rode from Johnsville with the three prisoners. Besides Hoss and the sheriff, there were ten men picked for jury duty, a deputy sheriff, the coroner and the county attorney. Hoss chafed at the slowness of the pace, for most of these men were soft townsmen of the county seat and, after five miles, most of them were complaining.

Come noon, they were close to the Circle X—an outfit Hoss had once owned an interest in. Trip Nagle, the present owner, was well and favorably known to Hoss, so he suggested they detour some miles and enjoy a good meal. The idea was hailed with delight by the wearied townsmen, and Hoss led the way.

Nagle was home, and he welcomed them with the fervency of one who finds the close attention of the calf-tally tiring. He instructed his cook, and trotted out some good whiskey. Before the meal was served, all were feeling happy, including the three prisoners. Nor were their spirits dampened by the juicy steaks, light panbread and strong coffee to which they applied themselves leisurely and with much gusto.

Trip Nagle and Old Hoss, with the swiftness of eating common to most range men, were first to finish, excused themselves and walked outside. There, Nagle discarded his beaming mask of the host.

"What's this all about, Hoss?"

Old Hoss reviewed the killing of Ferg Dollins and the subsequent developments. "If these boys of mine are telling the

truth," he finished—"and I think they are—they'll be turned loose at Granite Springs. If they're not, I'll drop in an' see you on the way back. But if I don't get word to you tomorrow or sooner, I wish you'd do me a favor."

"Glad to," said Nagle. "What can I do, Hoss?"

"Take a day off and drop down to the Bellclapper. Hit there about supper time, tomorrow night. I'll appreciate you're being there, Trip. You see, we'll be having quite a little celebration at the ranch. Throwing a party for these three boys. They don't know it, but I'm handing them each a thousand dollars for nailing the three killers of Old Berg."

Trip Nagle shook his head. "I'd like to attend the festivities, Hoss," he said ruefully. "You know that. But I'm right in the middle of the calf-count here an' . . . ."

"Takin' part in the social swarray ain't exactly the favor I want from you," allowed Hoss, batting his eyes. "It's something a hell of a lot more important than that."

"What?"

"Just a hunch of mine," grinned the old cowman. "Maybe something, maybe nothing at all. If you'll come, I'll outline your play when you get there. Will you?"

"Why not?" chuckled Nagle, whose chief amusement was in boasting of Hoss Greer's exploits. "I'll go you sight unseen, even if I lose."

They shook hands on it and then the rest were filing from the cook shack, ready to complete the ride to Granite Springs. They reached the watering place along about midafternoon, and Kintana, Timmons and McBride were put to work uncovering the rock cairn, from which an unpleasant smell was already issuing.

Even before the grisly remains were exhumed, Hoss detected a feeling among the coroner's jurymen, a sentiment favoring the prisoners.

When the bodies exposed, it was exactly as Kintana had recounted. Three Apaches, badly shot up. And—to add to Hoss' disquiet—one of the dead men was Turkey Tail—one of Chief Potro's four boys. All three were less than twenty years old. And, knowing more than a little about this younger generation of Apache braves and their skill at firearms, he commented on the fact that none of them had scored.

"Funny," he mused aloud, "that ridin' in here an' standin' you up, Kintana, not one slug touched you boys. How do you figger it?"

Kintana grimaced. "Mebby you don't know how fast a feller can shoot when his life depends on it, boss."

"Probably not," said Hoss drily. "What kinda guns were they carrying?"

Kintana flung a quick, bird-like glance at his brooding companions. "Why—uh—they had us covered with six-shooters. Yep, that's all they had. Nary a rifle on their saddles."

"What happened to the guns?" asked Hoss.

Kintana looked uncomfortable, filled his chest and pointed to his horse. "In our saddle bags, boss. Yeah, we glaumed 'em. Like the dapples, we figgered to sell 'em for a few dollars. Nothin' wrong with that, was there?"

Hoss didn't answer, went over and opened the bags, one by one. No guns could be found. McBride vented a harsh oath.

"Didn't expect to find 'em there, did you?" he growled. "Not after the sheriff holdin' our ponies for more'n a day."

"I searched your bags," admitted the sheriff, sourly, "but I found no guns."

"You're a damned liar!" spat Hozee Timmons, bridling. "If them guns is gone, you knew where. Actin' innocent, eh? Well, I never knowed a tinbadge that wasn't a crook at heart."

"No quarreling," cautioned the coroner.

"We've got a long ride to swing the circle down to Botfly, where we can put up for the night. Now, Kintana, describe just how the play came up and tell what happened—short but sweet!"

ONCE more, Kintana told the story Hoss had heard in the sheriff's office. Bill McBride and Hozee Timmons backed him up with thrilling descriptions of a gun fight under the stars. Hoss testified to the hearsay account of Ferg Dollins' last words and to his own examination of the moccasin-tracked road around the burned wagon and at the raided post.

The county attorney called upon the sheriff for his account of the arrest and then advised the jury to act deliberately and remand the prisoners into custody until the full truth of their almost miraculous story was verified. But when it came time for the jury to draw aside and deliberate, they took only a few minutes.

They were sick and tired of this jaunt and were anxious to get home. They found the deceased trio come to their deaths at the hands of Pud Kintana, Hozee Timmons and Bill McBride. Self-defense and justifiable homicide.

The sheriff and the attorney complained bitterly, the former threatening to place the matter before the grand jury, demand a true bill, and set a warrant for the three cowboys. The sheriff still smarted about the matter of the Indians' missing guns.

"It don't look good to me," he complained. "Them three are lying about the guns of the dead men! There wasn't no guns in them saddle bags, an' I was the first to go into them. Why then are they lyin'? Could it be they shot down three unarmed Apache boys? How do we know the grays don't belong to them, like I said in the first place?"

"You don't know nothin', you swell-headed old fool," snarled Kintana. "It just busts your heart when you ain't got a victim to hang, don't it?"

"Shut up!" barked Hoss. "What about these three boys, Mister County Attorney?"

"If it didn't require an order of the grand jury," gloomed the official, "I'd have the sheriff hold them. But as it is, they're free to ride. If I were you, Mister Greer, I'd keep them pretty close. Uncle Sam is liable to want those boys, and if they are gone, the government may ask you some pretty troublesome questions. Come on, men. Let's get started north."

"And us," Hoss grinned broadly at the three prisoners, as the sheriff's deputy removed the handcuffs, "We better get started—east."

CHAPTER FOUR

Baited Trap

IT WAS hard for Old Hoss to assume a genial, care-free pose on his ride to the Bellclapper with Kintana, Timmons and McBride. For underneath he felt anything but comfortable. He had been years building the friendship and trust of old Chief Potro and his Apache band, only to see his work undone in the lawlessness of three shadowy men on dapple gray ponies.

Under different circumstances, he could have exulted that the marauders had come to the end of their red trail. But not now. There was that promise of Potro, that the death of an Apache would call for its pay-off in white blood. Three Apache youths had died, and one of them was Potro's son.

That meant trouble—bad trouble. . . .

Heavy-hearted as he was at the prospect, Hoss had reason not to show his three companions his burden. They were high spirited, jubilant and openly grateful, as if they gave Hoss full credit for clinching the truth that it would have been quite impossible for the law to have convicted them on the evidence. Hoss had sneering-

ly told the county attorney so, and that official had tacitly admitted it.

So now Hoss joshed with them to cover the heaviness of his heart. But throughout that long, fast ride, with the three dapple grays loping behind at the end of the lead ropes, he worried and his brain was busy. So much hung upon his finding a way to deal with Potro and the Apaches.

They reached the Bellclapper sometime after midnight and went to bed. Next day he and Gil and the cowhands made a lot over Kintana, Timmons and McBride. Hoss called all work off. For the benefit of the outfit, he had the three recount the details of their adventure. A calf was slaughtered and, along about four in the afternoon, they all filed in to a big feed in the ranch house dining room.

Hoss broke out several bottles of good liquor from Gil's private stock, passed them around and downed a few drinks himself, hoping to assuage his growing feeling that Trip Nagle had failed him. Old Pegleg Bowers, the cook, hollered for them to "come an' get it," and the punchers answered with a whoop and a rush.

Nervously, Hoss went outside to find Nagle just alighting at the corral. Hoss hurried down and for some minutes regaled the Circle X boss with swift, low-toned talk.

When he had finished, Nagle pulled at his chin, studied a minute and then grinned. Then they shook hands and went inside.

Pegleg Bowers had done himself proud. And they made a wreck of his son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack, his cheese potatoes, light biscuits, black coffee and dried apple dumplings. When it was certain no man could eat more, Hoss rose laboriously, demanded silence and made a speech.

"Boys," he beamed, "I'm unused to public speakin', but under the circumstances I'm glad to suffer. You've all heard Kintana, Timmons an' McBride tell how they squared for Old Ferg Dollins. That was a fine job done an' I'm proud to count them a part of one of my outfits, prouder still to hand them somethin' more than my thanks."

He took three checks from his pocket, waved them. "Reward to the brave," he added pleasureably. "I have here a thousand dollar check for each of you three boys, an' I never spent three thousand with more pleasure. My thanks goes with it, an' the thanks of the Territory." He handed over the checks, amidst cheers. "An' another thing—you fetched back those three dapple grays, an' I'm waivin' any rights I might have to 'em."

Kintana protested. "I—I don't know if we'd dare ride them brutes, boss," he hedged. "They're pretty hot, an' some gent might take a shot at us. Or pick us up, like the Johnsville sheriff done."

"In a few days," countered Hoss, proudly, "the yarn will be out; I'll see to that. An' if there's trouble with the law, I'll stand behind you for all I've got. What you going to do with that money?"

"Save it," snapped McBride. "An' go right on workin' like nothing has happened."

"Good boys!" Hoss applauded them. "Now if you'll get along without me, I'd like to spend some time with Trip Nagle. Come on, Trip, le's you an' me talk over that cattle deal."

Nagle kicked back his chair, shaking his head. It'll have to be some other time, Hoss. Sorry. I've been down to Globe for money. I'm carryin' twenty thousand dollars in my saddle bags. I'm due to plunk it down on the V Cross T, at nine o'clock tomorrow morning.

"Old Rick Travis," he explained, "ain't go no confidence in a check or paper Yankee money. He still thinks the Civil War is on. So, if you don't mind, I'll be gettin' on to'rds home. Glad to have dropped in for such a feed. Nice going, Pegleg. And you three heroes; if I have

any renegades operatin' around the Circle X, I'll send for you. So-long, everybody."

Hoss went out with him, saw him away. "Take a roundabout trail," Hoss cautioned him. "An' wait on the mesa until you're pretty sure. Luck, feller!"

Back in the house, Hoss assumed a look of utter weariness. "Gil," he said, drawing the foreman aside. "I ain't had enough sleep to keep a bobcat alive. I'm hittin' the feathers an' ketchin' up." He dropped his voice, "But if Kintana an' Timmons an' McBride decide to change their minds, I'd like to be woke up. You savvy. Them boys ain't used to such riches an' they might leave you flat. If so, I'd like the chance of talkin' 'em out of it."

"I savvy," said Gil, and watched the old man drag wearily into the bedroom reserved for him.

ONCE the door closed behind him, Hoss snapped out of it. He reacted to a sudden burst of energy, darted to the window and stepped through. Hugging the shadows, he sped to the corral, caught and saddled a pony and lit out in a bee line for the Circle X. It was not what he had intended doing, for all the odds were against his being right. But after Trip Nagle had ridden away into the darkness, a fear had come to Old Hoss.

If the doubt born in him during the inquest at Granite Springs had any basis in fact, he had placed Trip Nagle in a way to being brought face to face with three heartless killers. And should those killers catch Trip and find no money in his saddle bags, they would kill him sure. He just couldn't take that chance.

Hoss called for all his pony had during that ride, brought it to the nest of rocks overlooking the Circle X home place in a state of exhaustion. Not a light showed among the buildings. The cowpunchers were out with the wagons and the cook had likely gone to bed. And already Hoss was cursing himself for a fool.

He had built up an idea of what might lie beneath the apparent innocence of Kintana, McBride and Timmons; then he had stampeded, and probably only suffered a hard ride for his pains.

He sat there watching the ranch, smoking one cigarette after another for a full hour. He was in a sweat of nervousness something more than an hour later, when Trip Nagle came riding up. He seemed amazed to find Hoss there.

"I got to thinkin' what a fool trick I'd played on you if them three overtook you," he said, relieved, "that I killed a horse gettin' here first. Let's ride down."

They put their ponies down the hill and turned them into the corral. Then they went to the house and got the cook up.

"What now?" asked Nagle, puzzled.

"Nothing to do but make a night of it," said Hoss, "likely you'll have the laugh on me come big daylight, but it's a shot in the dark an' we've got to be ready." He gazed at the broken-down old cowpuncher who did the cooking for the Circle X. "How'd you like to horn in on a ruckus tonight, Lampassas? With one man to face an' a thousand dollars to you if you lay him out without killin' him."

"Whee-ew!" The cook whistled. "A thousand simoleons! I'll take on a dozen hellions for that kind of money, Hoss."

"Good. And you, Trip?"

"Nothin' like a fight to make the blood run in a man's veins," grinned the cowman. "Whatever you say."

"Then it's settled. Trip, you an' Lampassas take the house. Plant yourselfs behind two inner doors. If them boys pay us a visit, they'll make sure there's nobody home, then start lookin' for that fake money we planted in their minds. I figger they will split an' make the search. When one comes through your door, pole him with yore gun barrel. No shootin' unless you have to. I want them alive."

"An' you?" asked Trip.

"I'll be in the bunkhouse. One will be sure to hunt there. Then too, I'll be handy to head 'em off if things go wrong in here an' they make a run for it. Now le's take our places."

He doused the light and went out to the empty bunkhouse, to sit on the edge of a bunk and suck at his cigarette. At best, there would be a long wait. And Hoss dreaded the passing of darkness, and the hooraw that would be his if he had guessed wrong. An hour went past and Hoss rose to work off steam by pacing. Then, suddenly, he was freezing in his tracks. The murmur of hoofbeats was striking through the night.

Hoss darted to the door to listen. His gun was in his hand now and every sense was keened. He sensed the swift approach of riders, then nothing. Silence again took command and Hoss knew bewilderment. Then he heard the spurs. Peering through the crack of the door, he saw the three ghosting figures, shadowy in the starlight. He saw them stop; heard the low murmur of their voices. Then two were moving toward the house and one was coming toward him.

Hoss gave with the door as it was pushed cautiously open. A head, clearly limned against the faint glow of the stars, intruded. The man was listening for the heavy breathing of sleeping men. Hearing nothing, he ventured a brief, repressed call.

"Hullo. Anybody home? How's chances of gettin' a bunk?" It was Bill McBride.

"Fine," barked Hoss, and struck. The barrel of his gun took the man on the back of his head. It knocked him flat and he lay still, so still Hoss wondered if he had swung too hard. He dragged McBride inside, lifted him to a bunk. "There's your bunk you wasn't lookin' for, you coyote," he breathed, and let himself out as the echo of a knock came from the house, followed by Kintana's voice.

"Hello the house. Who's here? Hello!"

No answer. Timmons tried it. And when there was no response, they tried the knob and entered. Hoss darted across the interval, pausing in the shade of the porch vines as a light sprang through the open doorway, flickered and died. Kintana said: "You take that door; I'll take this one. If he's in bed, jump him an' gag him down. Holler an' I'll come a runnin'. We don't want to rouse them bunkhouse boys."

Bootsteps echoing faintly on the floor. Doors squeaking open. The dull impact of steel against flesh and bone, followed by a low moan and the clump of a fallen body on the floor. Again Kintana's voice rang out, stiff and wary.

"What was that, Tim? You all. . . ."

Trip Nagle's shout broke in. "Lift them hookers feller, or I'll—"

His threat was blasted out in a crash gunfire. Kintana came moving toward the porch and Hoss moved out from behind the vines, his gun leveled. "Game's up, Kintana. Throw down an' pitch up!"

Kintana's answer was a snarl and a flash of red from his gun, but he shot too quickly and the bullet plucked at Old Hoss's sleeve. Behind him, Trip Nagle got a bullet in the leg. Hoss's slug took the man in the shoulder, breaking it. The gun fell from his fingers and he staggered back against the wall, wild curses breaking across his lips. Then he was sliding down the wall to sit on the porch, whimpering with shock and pain. Trip Nagle came limping out, cursing.

"Damned ol' jumpy nerves anyway. When he turned, I figgered he wasn't comin' in an' started bawlin' like a calf. Good work, Hoss. You had it figgered just right. What now?"

"Yeah, you got any more you want took care of, Hoss?" Lampassas came out, dragging the limp form of Hozee Timmons. "Cripes! When did I ever have so much fun?"

"Look after them two," ordered Hoss. "Come on, Trip. Le's you an' me find their ponies. I'm just hopin' they figgered this as their clean-up an' brought their loot along. They stopped out here somewhere."

CHAPTER FIVE

Blood Offering

THEY found the grays tied in the brush, a hundred yards south. And with them were the three ponies they had ridden to the Bellclapper. Those last were rigged with sawbuck saddles and heavily packed. Darkness hid the fierce grin warping Old Hoss' face. He slipped the tarp from under the diamond hitch of one pack, thumbed a match alight and dug into the stuff it covered. Indian blankets were piled high atop heavily weighted kiacks.

"Humph," chuckled the old cowman. "Here's their loot taken from Screwtail Post an' Ferg Dollins' wagon. That's all I want to know. Trip, can you have a man lead these packs down to the Bellclapper in the morning?"

"Sure can, Hoss. Where you headed?"

Hoss sank his fingers into Trip's arm. "That depends on how you boys feel about this," he said vaguely. "Le's go down an' find Lampassas."

They led the horses into the ranch house yard and called Lampassas over. Hoss remained silent for a few seconds, then: "You boys got any doubts that these are the ones I want?" he asked.

"Hell, no," snapped Trip Nagle. "You baited the trap with a yarn about twenty thousand in my saddle bags an' they come for it, a-whoopin' an' a-shootin'. All bad, them three, an' I hand it to you for bein' able to look beneath their innocent lookin' masks."

"How about you, Lampassas?" asked Hoss. "I'll unload those packs if you like, an' show you the stuff taken over Dollins' dead body. Loot of Screwtail Post an'—"

"Holy cow!" broke in Lampassas. "You don't need to preach to me. I'm sold."

"You boys will understand why I wanted no killin' here tonight," said Hoss. "These three killed Dollins, my pardner an' good friend. Old Ferg's ghost won't do no walkin', I'm sure of that. An' the same for the little Mex boy, murdered at the post, but Potro's boy and his two saddlemates; their ghosts are walkin' right now. Cryin' out to their kin to square for bullets in the back. Them ghosts won't be easy to lay, you savvy? Not without bad trouble an' unnecessary bloodshed. So when anybody asks you what came of these boys, you'll understand why I'm turning them over to Potro for trial, an' keep your mouths shut."

For a long minute, the three of them stared at each other in the starlight. Caught by some dread and nameless horror. Then slowly the heads of the two Circle X men nodded. It was at once a commitment and a trust. Hoss didn't wait to ask guarantees. With their help, he toted the three renegades, two still unconscious, one groaning, into the yard and roped them to the saddles of the dapple horses. Then, rising to his own saddle, he tossed his hand to Trip and Lampassas and set out for Potro's summer camp, on Rattlesnake.

The gray horses belonged to Potro's band, just as the angry old chief had said, and according to Potro's own threat, these three killers belonged there also. A life for a life. There are many expressions on the face of justice.

THE sun tipped over the mountain rim, sent its first beam down upon the buildings of the Bellclapper—on Black River. Jay birds roused the bunkhouse boys with their infernal morning clatter.

A few minutes later—very few—Gil Pastime came racing to the door of Hoss Greer's room, calling his name and pounding on the panel. And when the old timer unlocked and stood there in his shirt tail, blinking like a sun-blinded owl, Gil unburdened.

"Hoss," he confessed miserably, "I'm sorry as the devil. I musta died after I got to bed, because I never heard nothin'. Now I get up an' find that them three hog-rich heroes of ours has rode away sometime in the night, takin' their warbags an' every cent outa the pockets of the rest of the boys."

"You don't mean to tell me," yawned Hoss, drowsily. "Spoiled, I reckon. Just goes to show, Gil, what happens to young fellers when they get too much money all of a sudden. Let 'em go. Good riddance, I say!"

"I'm sure gonna miss them boys," mourned Gil. "Especially the way Potro an' his Apache band are actin', up around the reservation line. They're actin' plumb mean, runnin' off cattle an' spyin' on everything we do up yonder. I wouldn't be surprised to see 'em startin' trouble most any time."

Hoss stifled another yawn. "Don't sweat no hair worryin' about that, Gil," he said carelessly. "I had a dream last night an' I saw a little spotted turtle dove of peace settlin' on Potro's shoulder. I saw him plain as I see you, heard him say that the heart of the Apache had turned soft to'rds his white brother. Them people is gonna be all right from here out, Gil. You can take my word for that. Well, now that you've got me up, I reckon I'll have a cup of coffee with you an' be ridin' down to Tres Alamos. I've wasted too much time up here already. Cripes, but it's good to get a night's sleep under yore belt, ain't it?"

An hour later, Gill watched his boss ride away, scratching his head, a bewildered look in his eyes.

"There goes a deep man," he muttered. "A feller can't make nothin' out of his words nor tell what's goin' on in his mind. Dream! Turtle dove of peace lightin' on Ol' Potro's shoulder. Now what the hell did he mean by that?"

Yet even as he questioned that dream, Gil had the feeling that it was fated to be true. From anybody else, it would have been pure hogwash. But coming from Hoss . . . Well, a man bet wise when he chunked his money down on that strange human riddle that men called by so many different names!

THE END

★ ★

Georges Surdez writes "—But a First Class Fighting Man," a first class fighting novelette of the Foreign Legion, wherein a corporal young in years but old in the ways of a soldier has to gamble death in uniform against life at ease in mufti—and makes a soldier's choice.

In the same issue—

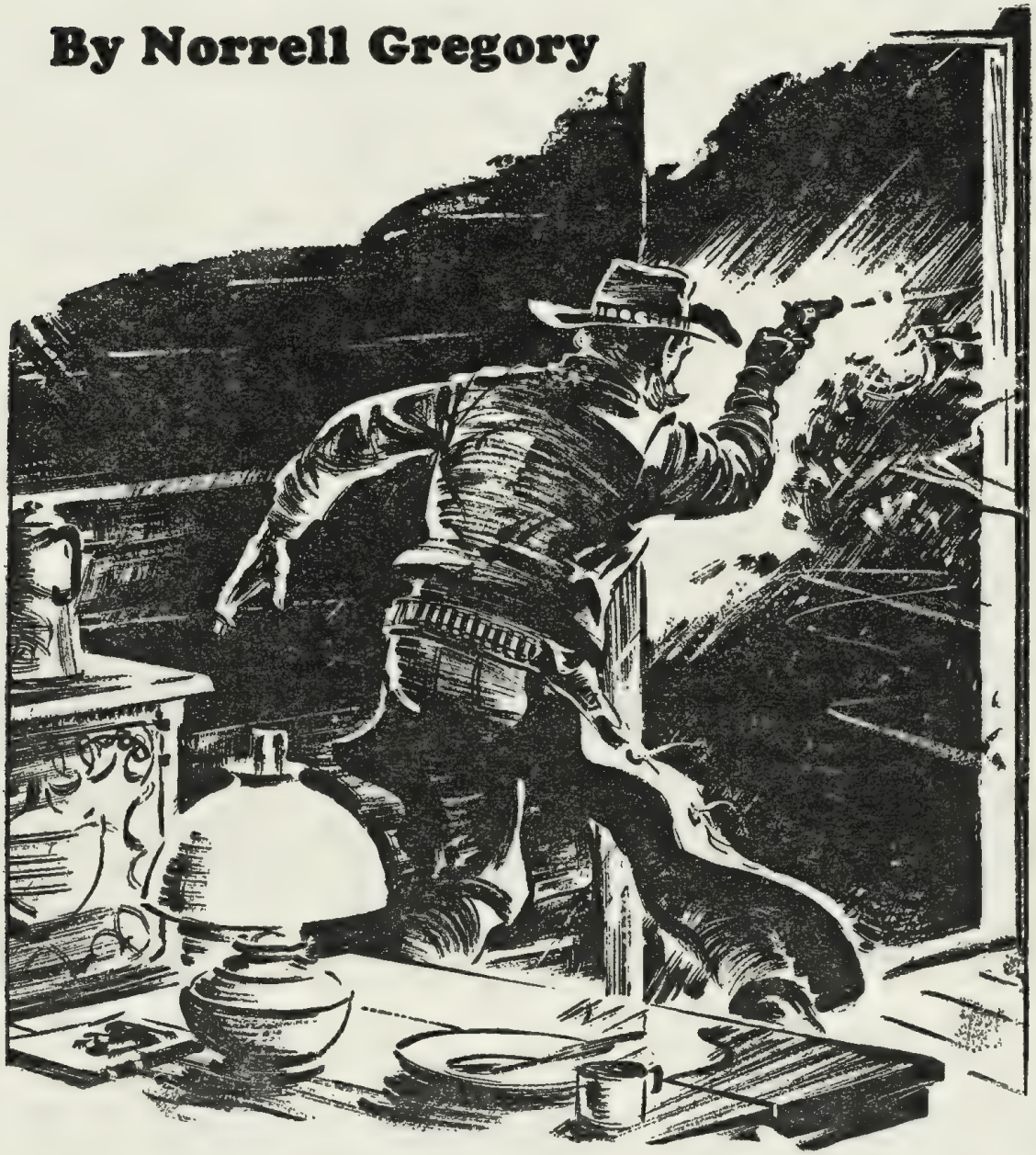
"Drums Do Talk," by H. Bedford-Jones; 'Telegraph," a story of Australian trails and trackers by Albert Richard Wetjen; "High Pressure Area," Westmoreland Gray's stirring story of trouble on an oil field; a war aviation yarn by Loring Dowst, and other good stories are in the August issue of

Adventure 15c

On sale at all stands July 10th

• Barbwire, Bullets —

By Norrell Gregory



"They was yellin' for blood, and they sure as hell got it!"

Nester guns, guarding the gleaming barbwire, spelled hell enough for any pair of hard-working cowmen.... Until, in the fateful stains of a bloody boot-print, they read the damning last-hope plea of a peaceful range gone kill-mad!

CHAPTER ONE

Barb Wire or Bullets!

UNMINDFUL of the cattle spilling out over the gulch-bottom behind him, big Chap Sargent sat on his horse and stared at the fence, where no fence ought to be, a slow rage boiling up inside him.

Four strands, strung tight as fiddle-

And Cowman Courage! • •

A Strong novel of nester Warfare

strings and stapled to substantial posts, the fence stretched completely across the gulch, effectively blocking the trail to summer range.

From behind came his brother's impatient shout: "What's wrong up there, Chap?"

Chap twisted in the saddle. "Come up here, Kelly!"

Kelly Sargent came hell-bent, as was his way. Barely turned his majority, he was a full ten years younger than Chap. Slender and quick of movement, while Chap was heavy-built, raw-boned and deliberate.

Kelly's blue eyes blazed when he saw the barrier. "Some more of Jeff Careen's work!" he exclaimed. "Chap, I've been tellin' you a long time we'd either have to fight that hound or pull stakes!"

Chap stepped down with a sort of fateful deliberation, pulled a pair of wire pliers from his pocket and advanced on the fence.

"I'll be damned if I let him get away

with this!" he said. "This is open range, and no man has a right to block it."

The top wire of the fence jumped and twanged. Kelly, delighted by Chap's show of fight, exclaimed: "Cut the holy hell out of her, Chap!"

Chap did just that, and to make the job complete, Kelly dropped a loop over the nearest post, fed the spurs to his horse and yanked out that and five more posts before he stopped. Chap was reaching for his saddle horn when a rifle bellowed, cannon-like in the still morning air.

Chap heard the whine of the bullet—it was that close—and ducked. A voice from up the slope called: "Easy, down there! The next slug won't go high. Now you fellers has had your fun and I'll have mine. Put that fence back!"

Chap saw him then, a gaunt, oldish fellow with a graying beard that had once been black. Sitting on a boulder calm as you please with the rifle cradled on his elbows and knees, lined directly at him. The old wolf looked and sounded mean, and to make it worse, neither of the boys were heeled. It was only a short drive up the gulch to the range and they hadn't dreamed of needing guns.

Kelly spoke with hot rashness: "You go plumb to hell—" But he never finished.

A gun roared, and Kelly's hat gave a jump before it rolled in the dirt. "Damn you!" Kelly was almost crying, he always did when he got real mad and couldn't do anything, "Damn you, if I had my old—"

The oldster's voice cut in. "You guy that cut that fence, get busy and put it back. You on the horse, start shovin' them cattle back where they come from. *Now!*"

Chap knew too well Kelly's reckless courage. The kid would charge a mob barehanded. He spoke low and quick: "Do as he says, Kelly; our turn will come later."

Then moving deliberately he stepped over and caught the loose strands of the fence and began dragging wire and posts back into place. Kelly, apparently reconciled to temporary defeat, began furiously shoving cattle back down the gulch.

As he passed close to Chap on one of his dashes he hissed: "Take your time, take your time!"

Chap would have done that anyhow. While his deliberation was often mistaken for slowness, Chap could move and move fast when he chose. But no man could hurry him against his will. Now he eased along, shoving the posts back into the holes from which Kelly had uprooted them, killing time. When he tried to make the ends of the wires meet, they wouldn't —not by two feet.

Without looking up he said, "Reckon you'll have to be satisfied with that, mister."

"Spool of wire over there behind that rock, feller. You got pliers—get busy and splice that wire."

IT WAS extremely humiliating. Chap moped over and took a lot of time cutting off a piece of wire. All the time he kept a keen eye out, waiting for Kelly's play. The kid was already long out of sight. Chap figured he had hit for their ranch to get a gun. It was only about a mile and Kelly could get more speed out of a horse than a Piute.

While he worked at the splices he took a good look at this old wolf. Couldn't place him as any of Jeff Careen's hands, but that didn't mean anything. Since Old Dave Careen, Jeff's uncle, had turned the running of the C-Bar over to his nephew, Jeff was always hiring and firing hands. This old hombre looked tough enough to fill Jeff's order for a fence watch-dog.

As Chap worked he talked: "You ought to know you can't make this stick; this is open range. . . ."

"If you work your hands more and your jaw less you'll get along better."

Chap saw Kelly's head appear over the top of the gulch wall directly above the man. There was fully a hundred yards of steep, rough ground down which Kelly would have to climb to get at the guard, and Chap suddenly broke into a cold sweat, for Kelly had nothing but a stout club! Trust that fool kid to attempt the impossible!

One rock dislodged—even a pebble—and this old wolf would shoot. Chap knew enough about men to know that the old devil wasn't bluffing. He meant business.

Chap stood up and slammed the pliers on the ground. "I'll be damned if I lift another finger!" he said angrily. "Fix your own fence if you want it fixed!"

The old fellow's bearded cheek cuddled the rifle stock like he loved it.

"You ain't *tryin'* to get along with me, mister! Pick up them pliers and get busy!"

For answer Chap kicked the pliers twenty feet. Kelly was coming down fast and he had to protect the kid. There was a nerve-racking pause, then the oldster spoke again: "I'll count three," he drawled. "Then if you don't go for them pliers, I'll let you have it."

Chap had banked on that. He moved slowly after the pliers, talking loudly all the time, abusing the man and making dire threats. The old cuss seemed deaf as a post, now.

Kelly was close then. Chap saw him get set for the jump that would bring him within striking range. Kelly even had the club up when another gun, across the gulch, snarled.

Rock dust exploded full in Kelly's face and with a wild yell he pitched backward, clawing at his eyes. The yell relieved Chap enormously. He knew no mortally hit person could yell like Kelly had. It was a shout of anger rather than pain.

From across the gulch a treble voice piped, "Should I let him have it again, Pa?"

The old wolf never had taken his gun or eye off Chap. Without moving he called back, "Just keep him covered. If he tries anything else, shoot to kill!"

Chap saw Kelly sitting up, rubbing furiously at his eyes. He called, "Come on down, Kelly. I reckon we're licked—for the present."

Kelly came stumbling down the slope, tears of rage, pain and humiliation streaming from his eyes. Chap jerked the splices together, looked straight into the gun muzzle and said grimly: "We'll be back, mister—heeled!"

The oldster waved the gun barrel. "Git!"

KELLY didn't say a word until they came to the place where he had left his horse. "An old man and a damned kid!" he said bitterly. "Chap, we let an old man and a kid run us ragged! We'll never live this down when it gets out, and you can be damned sure Jeff Careen will see that it does get out."

Chap's mind was working now. "Kid, I doubt that Jeff Careen had anything to do with that fence. For one thing it would hurt him as much as us, and for another, Jeff don't make a habit of hirin' old men and kids."

Kelly said bitterly, "That hound would hire anybody that would come when he whistles. We waited too long to fight already. Let's get our guns and smoke that damned watch-dog out of here!"

He jumped on his horse and was hitting for the ranch. Chap restrained him.

"Before we do anything I'll go see Old Dave Careen. Even if Jeff Careen did put up that fence and set the watch-dog, I doubt if old Dave knows about it."

"Old Dave is just as ornery as his nephew!" declared Kelly. "But if you got to see him first, come on! We'll go see—"

"*I'll* go. You stay at the ranch."

"Chap! You might run into a fight down there!"

"I know damned well I will if *you* go

along. That's why I'm leavin' you home."

Kelly shut his mouth tight and screwed up his eyes. Chap had to grin behind his hand. Kelly was a fightin' fool and wild as a mustang, but there was one thing he would *always* do—he would mind Chap. Sometimes he argued about it, but in the end he always did exactly what Chap told him to do.

At their cabin Chap changed his saddle from the cow-pony to his great rangy claybank. Ugly as sin and tough, that horse never saw a trail but what he could pack big Chap all day and come in with his head up.

Chap was just mounting when Kelly exclaimed: "Look who's comin'!"

Chap saw two horsemen headed across their meadow. One was Jake Ginder from Lodsetter, a sort of justice and general cow-town lawyer. The other was old Dave Careen, himself.

Old Dave rode with his hands locked on the horn, solid in the saddle. He had not shaved in years, and Chap could scarcely see his lambent old eyes, peering through the tangle of beard and hair.

Old Dave growled, "Hear you got nester trouble up this way."

Chap said, "Who told you that, Dave?"

Old Dave jerked his head toward Jake Ginder. "Reckon I'll ride up and see him."

"Yes," Chap told old Dave, "we got a nester up here. Or I *reckon* he's a nester. You ought to know, Dave."

"I know him all right," replied the old man, unmoved. "Jake, you can wait for me here."

THE old man rode on, and Jake Ginder dismounted. He took a cigar out of his pocket and lighted it. He was a thin-shanked man about forty-five or fifty with thin, straw-colored hair. He had quick, shifty eyes, and Chap knew he packed an amazing knowledge of range events in his thin-thatched head.

Chap said, "You got an oar in this?"

"Me?" Jake pretended surprise. "I rode over to see if I could get Kelly to go over to my ranch on the Dutchman and rep for me a few days."

Kelly spoke right up, "Can't go. Got too much to do here."

Chap drawled, "You be still, Kelly—I'll decide that."

As Kelly went moping towards the cabin Jake Ginder grinned. "Sure got that kid tamed, ain't you, Chap?"

"I just about raised Kelly," Chap replied. "He ain't like most kids—he knows I know more than he does."

Jake shot a puff of smoke out of his mouth. "Thought I heard gun-talk as we rode up the valley.

"You did. That nester up there and his kid run me and Kelly plumb ragged this mornin'."

Jake Ginder chuckled. "Jim Kahoe always was a salty cuss," he said.

"Kahoe?" said Chap. "You know that old wolf, Jake?"

"Sure. He took up that piece of land over twenty years ago, long before you boys ever hit these parts. He put up that old cabin. I seen him the other day, and he said he was goin' to fix it up and live there the rest of his time. Reckon Old Dave will have something to say about that."

"Why did he leave this country in the first place, Jake?"

"Feud." Jake sucked at his cigar. "You see, Kahoe had a boy—a good-lookin' hell-bendin' no-good scamp—about like Kelly. And old Dave had a girl—a pretty little spit-fire. She never would pay attention to old Dave."

Jake stopped then and shot a shifty look at Chap. Chap said, "This is sure news to me, Jake."

"It was kept quiet—with reason. One day old Dave caught his girl and Kahoe's boy in town. He just naturally pulled a six-shooter and shot young Kahoe all to giblets. Killed him in cold blood."

"That sure sounds like the Careen way," Chap replied.

"Jim Kahoe disappeared, and so did old Dave's girl. I never seen Kahoe for twenty year—not till he drove through town the other day."

"Jake," said Chap sternly, "you ought to be shot yourself! Lettin' old Dave ride up there *knowin'* what he would run in to."

"Old Dave knows," Ginder replied coolly. "Let the two old fools fight it out, if they want to. If you're wise, Chap, you'll stay out of it."

A sudden rifle shot came roaring down the valley. Chap looked at Ginder. Ginder was staring up the valley, a queer expression in his shifty eyes.

"There comes Dave now!" Ginder exclaimed. "For a minute I was scared, but he seems to be all right."

Chap however, saw that old Dave was not all right. He was holding the saddle horn in a death grip and swaying as he rode. Fifty yards from the cabin he pitched headlong from the saddle and hit hard. His horse sort of humped his back, but stood still.

JAKE GINDER ripped out an oath and started toward him, his thin shanks flailing the air. Chap passed Ginder and had old Dave's clothing open when Ginder arrived, winded.

"Is he hit bad, Chap?" he puffed.

Chap turned old Dave over and showed Ginder where the bullet had come out. "Shot plumb through. Old Dave died like he lived—tough."

Ginder said, "Well, I reckon Kahoe has finally squared accounts."

Kelly's warning shout came from the cabin. Chap snapped erect. Three riders were coming up the valley, hell-bent. Foremost rode Jeff Careen, old Dave's nephew. Behind him rode two of his imported gunmen.

Chap saw Kelly dive back into the cabin, after a gun, he knew. The three riders stormed past the cabin before Kelly came out and Jeff Careen near split his horse's mouth as he reined in before Chap, standing almost over old Dave.

Jeff Careen hit the ground, a hulking, big brute of a man, with a red face and bulging jowls. He looked at Chap out of his little, meaty eyes, and there was foam at his mouth corners.

His two gunmen sat their saddles, their eyes watchful and mean, hands close to exposed gun-butts.

Jeff Careen said hoarsely, "Damn you, Sargent, you'll hang for this!"

Kelly leaped out of the cabin and came pounding, a gun gripped in either hand. McCoy, one of the gunmen, twisted about, jerked his six-shooter and snapped a shot at Kelly. The other gunnie went for his Colt. Kelly's guns crashed twice, and McCoy's pistol flew forty feet. The other fellow let out a wild howl and grabbed at a smashed forearm.

Jeff Careen reached for his gun. Chap wasn't heeled. He stepped in, and with amazing swiftness, his fist smashed Careen full on his bulging jaw. Jeff Careen fell square across his dead uncle.

Jake Ginder's eyes popped. He said, "Goddlemighty!"

Kelly came on up, swinging one gun, the other covering the two gunmen who sat holding up their hands, their faces twisted with a quick fear. Chap pulled Jeff Careen off his dead uncle, stood him on his feet and shook him. Jeff's eyes oscillated crazily. His hand crept to his jaw where Chap's fist had landed. He tried to focus his eyes on Chap.

"You—" he began.

But Jake Ginder cut in sharply, "You're wrong, Jeff, if you think these boys had anything to do with this. I was right here when it happened. It was that damned nester, Jim Kahoe."

Jeff Careen stared down at his uncle. "Is he dead?"

"Shot plumb through and through," Ginder replied. "Not here, Jeff. Up there," Ginder motioned. "He rode nearly a mile after he was shot."

Jeff Careen turned and climbed back on his horse. "I'll send up a wagon. Come on, boys."

The three clattered back down the valley, and Chap stood there, momentarily appalled by Jeff Careen's callousness. He stooped and picked up old Dave and carried him down to the cabin. It just didn't seem human to leave him lying out there like a dead dog.

Ginder reached for his horse's reins. "Be some hell over this," he said. "Jim Kahoe had better be huntin' a hole. What about gettin' Kelly to rep for me?"

"You'd better go, Kelly," Chap said. "We can sure use the money."

"Damn it, Chap," pleaded Kelly, "I can't go *now.*"

"Them's orders, kid," Chap replied.

Kelly said, "All right," and went for his horse.

Chap watched them ride off, a lump in his throat. He was taking a mean advantage of Kelly. He knew just how bad Kelly wanted to be around, now that things were popping. But Jake Ginder had been right when he's said there would be trouble over the shooting of old Dave, and Chap knew he just *had* to get Kelly out of the way. There just wasn't any way of keeping that kid out of a fight and Chap knew they couldn't afford to get mixed up in this one.

Ginder both puzzled and infuriated him. Ginder could have prevented that killing—Chap almost believed the fellow had deliberately brought it on. At the same time he couldn't feel very hard towards Ginder, because Ginder had had a perfect set-up to pin that killing on either him or Kelly—or both. It was sure lucky he happened to be around.

But thinking it over, Chap could see it was going to be tough for him and Kelly now, anyhow—with a man like Jeff Careen running the big C-Bar. Mighty tough! Jeff would see to that. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Hemp Necktie for a Nester

IT WAS Mac McCloud that came with the wagon for old Dave. McCloud was one of the few old hands remaining on the C Bar. Jeff Careen hadn't been able to get rid of him while his uncle lived.

Mac was grim mouthed and broody as he helped Chap load his old boss for Dave Careen's last ride.

Chap said, "Sheriff been notified?"

McCloud, already in the wagon seat, looked far down the valley. "Don't reckon that will be necessary," he said grimly. "I'll break down and admit that I don't like Jeff a damn bit, but old Dave has always treated me square. Hangin's too good for that damn nester!"

Chap couldn't blame Mac for feeling that way. A man had to be mighty mean not to have *one* friend to stand up for him.

"Just be sure you don't make any mistake, Mac."

"What d'ye mean—mistake? You didn't do it, did you? And I don't reckon even Kelly—"

Chap said sharply, "You can stop right there, Mac!"

McCloud said with dogged moodiness, "Then it's a simple matter. Jim Kahoe done it, and I'll be too glad to lay a hand to the rope that hangs him!"

"What about Kahoe's boy that old Dave shot down in cold blood, twenty years ago?"

McCloud's eyes jerked about. "Who in hell told you about *that.*"

"Jake Ginder."

"Jake Ginder is a lyin' hound, and so crooked he couldn't foller a snake's track!"

"But it's so, ain't it, Mac?"

"Young Kahoe needed killin'! He was leadin' Dave's girl astray and braggin' about it. He got just what he deserved. You ain't," McCloud looked hard at Chap, "standin' up for that damn' nester, are you?"

"I'm not standin' up for anybody in this," Chap replied, "but before I'd help hang a man I'd have to be plumb sure he had it comin'."

McCloud drove off, slow and careful, as if he were afraid the jolting would waken his old boss, and Chap watched him out of sight. Somehow, he felt mighty sorry for Mac. Mac was all right. He wouldn't last long at the C Bar now, with Jeff Careen running it.

Just before dark, Chap saw a lone horseman riding down the valley on a horse that was limping on the left fore foot. As the rider came closer he saw that it was Frenchie DeBolt, another of Jeff Careen's gunmen and reputedly the toughest. A man who made a profession of killing in cold blood.

Rage swirled again in Chap. Frenchie had, no doubt, been planted up the valley by Jeff Careen to watch him and Kelly; to see that neither of them communicated with the nester.

FRENCHIE would have ridden on past, had not Chap stepped before his horse and stopped him. Frenchie's swarthy face twisted and he started to reach for his gun. Then he stopped, and his black eyes licked at the open cabin door. Chap's voice ran low and dangerously.

"DeBolt, I'm sick and tired of havin' my range polluted by skunks. Next time, you ride plumb around this ranch."

Frenchie's upper lip crept back from his teeth. Again his eyes licked towards the cabin. "You talk mighty big when you got your brother hid in your cabin, waitin' to pot me!"

"You're a liar, DeBolt! We don't do our shootin' that way. I don't need *any* backin' when I'm lookin' at you. Next time, ride around this place!"

DeBolt took it and rode on. Whether he actually believed Kelly was laying for him in the cabin, or whether he was just plain yellow, Chap couldn't decide. Anyhow it made him feel better to know that he had made one of Jeff Careen's toughest gunmen eat dirt without even so much as a pocket knife to back his play.

It pleased Chap, too, when he thought of the time Kelly had made the whole smear of them, including Jeff Careen, crawfish publicly, over at Lodsetter in the Dutchman saloon.

Now he missed the kid like the devil. Kelly could sure brighten up a place. Chap began to wonder if he had done right in shipping Kelly out of the country. He might need that kid bad before this was over. Dog-tired and bothered, he went to bed and slept like a log. A gun fired at his head would scarcely have awakened him.

It was daylight when someone pounding on the door awakened him. He jumped up, jerked on his pants and opened the door in his bare feet.

Wearing a bloody bandage about his head, Mac McCloud sat his horse outside. Down by the corral Chap saw another man dismounting. It looked like Charlie Hillman, a rancher below the C Bar.

McCloud said toughly, "Where was you last night, Chap?"

Chap didn't like Mac's tone. "Right here, Mac. I slept sound."

"You must have slept damned sound," Mac grunted. "Where's Kelly?"

"Kelly went over on the Dutchman, yesterday, to rep for Jake Ginder. Any more questions, Mac?"

"We took a necktie up to that damned nester last night."

"You and the rest of Jeff Careen's hellhounds!" Chap said scornfully. "Well, did you get it tied?"

"We got hell shot out of us," MacCloud admitted. "And we didn't get it tied." He looked down and kept his look down.

"This country has come to a hell of a pass when a gang led by Jeff Careen can't lynch one old man and a *kid,* Mac," Chap said, scorn heavy in his voice.

"There was more than Jeff's outfit, Charlie Hillman there, was along, and so was a lot of other boys from the valley."

"The whole damned country against an old man and a kid!" Chap sneered. "Mac, I'm against murder just as much as you are, but I don't like lynchin'—"

Hillman, coming up cut in hotly, "There was more than *two* in that cabin, Chap. And it shore as hell hadn't better been you or that damned brother of yours! Come on, Mac, I've seen enough!"

With that, Hillman spurred his horse and rode on.

Chap looked after him with a narrowed look. "Just what was Charlie drivin' at, Mac?"

"Are you *shore* Kelly is reppin' over on the Dutchman, Chap?"

Chap raged, "I'm sick of this! Everybody is tryin' to pin this on Kelly or get him mixed up in it. Get the hell out of here."

MacCloud looked at Chap moodily, then he looked down intently at the door step.

"I was tryin' to do you a favor, Chap," he said. He looked down at the step again and rode on.

Chap looked down. There, plain as print on a white page, was a bloody bootmark.

CHAPTER THREE

Death-Trap Hideaway

CHAP went sick all over. Then he heard it—the slow painful breathing of someone in the lean-to where Kelly always slept. He had to *drive* himself toward that door, and slowly he pushed it open.

Kelly's long body, full clothed, lay face down across the bunk. His booted feet stuck out over the edge and from the toe of the left boot blood still dripped.

Chap hated to turn him, but he did, easy and slow. The wound itself did not seem serious—a bullet hole through the calf of Kelly's leg—but it had bled the kid white.

White as cotton. No dead person's face could have been whiter—or colder. Chap cut off the boot, slit the trouser leg and stopped the blood. Then he forced a little whiskey between Kelly's teeth. His heartbeat was fast, but steady; his breathing regular.

Chap left him then, and went down to the barn. Kelly's horse with its blood-stained stirrup was there. That was what Charlie Hillman had seen. Mac McCloud, Chap realized, had been looking at Kelly's bloody footprint.

He washed the saddle free of blood but did not take it off the horse. Then he fed both the claybank and Kelly's mount grain and saddled the claybank. He knew they were going to have to use those horses soon.

Kelly had his eyes open when Chap came back to the cabin. He smiled faintly but his voice was hardly above a whisper. "Made it, did I? Sure never thought a little hole like this could get me down."

Chap said, "Save your strength kid. You're goin' to need it."

He gave Kelly some water with whiskey in it. "Lay still," he said when Kelly showed he wanted to talk. "I'll fix some breakfast. We got to get out of here, Kelly, for a time anyhow."

He worked fast, cooking up a big meal, then made gruel for Kelly. Weak as the kid was, he couldn't take anything solid. "Eat it slow," he directed. "We can't have you gettin' sick at your stummick now. Want me to feed you?"

Kelly replied with a show of spirit, "I can feed myself. Chap, I want to talk to yuh!"

"After you've et," Chap replied.

He left Kelly while he ate his own breakfast. He wasn't hungry, but he wolfed down a big feed because he didn't know when he would have a chance to eat again.

Then he made a package of grub that would keep and could be packed, stripped the blankets from his bunk and made a roll of them. When he came back into the lean-to Kelly was sitting up, looking stronger. "Chap, I want to talk!"

"Talk then, but don't get excited."

"Jake and I stopped at the C-Bar," Kelly said, "and Jake and Jeff Careen had a long pow-wow. After we rode on I asked Jake what was up. He acted like he didn't want to tell me at first. Finally he said Jeff was cookin' up a lynchin' party for tomorrow night—"

Chap cut in quickly, "You sure he said *tomorrow,* kid?"

"Dead sure, Chap. Cause he went on to explain how Jeff aimed to wait until his uncle was buried. Then he told me about Old Dave killin' Kahoe's boy and what a dirty shame it was that Kahoe had to be hanged just for payin' old Dave back in his own coin—"

Chap raged, "Why that dirty, low-down, crooked *hound!*"

KELLY smiled faintly. "Course I fell for it, Chap. I done just what he figured I would; rode out to warn Kahoe. And the lynchin' party caught me there."

Chap ground his teeth.

"I'm glad I went, Chap, cause Jim Kahoe never killed old Dave. Both him and his girl—"

"Girl!" exclaimed Chap. "Was that kid a girl?"

"She's a girl all right, but she ain't no kid. She's nineteen years old. Her name is Ann Kahoe. Jim Kahoe is her dad."

"You mean her granddad, don't you, kid?"

"No I don't. You remember she called him Pa when we had that brush with them, and she filled my eyes full of rock dust. She's plumb spunky, Chap. Well, I was talkin' to 'em when that posse came boilin' up there a yellin' for blood, and they shore as hell got it! We stood 'em off for a while until they burned us out. If they hadn't, we'd been there yet. Kahoe and I both got hit when we made a run for it. Him and Ann are hid out, up the river. He was hit hard. I rode in to get you to help and—well, I don't even remember even findin' the cabin here."

"We got to make tracks, kid," Chap said quietly. "If it was just Jeff and his gang, we'd fight 'em to a showdown. Jeff's got the other ranchers stirred up. Was anybody killed on their side?"

"I guess there was," Kelly said grimly. "I know I got two of Jeff Careen's hands, myself. I didn't try to hit any of the others. I tried to get a shot at Jeff and that damned Frenchie, but I couldn't spot 'em. It was a pretty warm party, Chap, with about two dozen guys cuttin' loose at the cabin. We was plumb lucky to get away."

"I reckon you was, kid," Chap replied soberly, "but I reckon it's mighty lucky you didn't go to the Dutchman. Kahoe and his girl wouldn't had a chance against that bunch, game as that old cuss is."

He hunted up an odd boot for Kelly and another pair of pants, made Kelly put on a heavy sheepskin coat, then brought up the horses, tied the packages behind the saddle and helped Kelly mount. Kelly looked mighty washed out and had to hold the saddlehorn to stay on.

"Ol' worl' goin' 'round and 'round!" he murmured. He kept the saddle but Chap rode close to him, ready to catch him if he fell. Kelly would stick to a saddle if he were shot half in two.

They pushed up the Morelock into

rough country. Where an old trail forded the brawling stream Kelly said, "We turn down here on this side.

Chap kept a tight grip on Kelly's arm then, for the water, while not deep was very swift and the bottom was strewn with hidden stones, slick as glass. The horses stumbled and plunged.

The near bank was high here, thirty feet or more—solid rock against the current.

"In there," said Kelly.

IT WAS at once a cunning hideout—but it was a death trap as well, Chap instantly noted. That cavern, scoured out by higher waters, was invisible unless you rode downstream as they had done. It was safe enough now, but it would be bad to be caught there during a quick rise of the river.

Kelly fainted dead away when Chap lifted him from the saddle.

Inside, Chap found the girl and old Jim Kahoe. Jim Kahoe was flat on the bare damp rock, his eyes, in the semi-gloom of the place, like burning coals. But the girl who faced him clenched a six-shooter in her fist. Looking at her, Chap didn't wonder that Kelly had so quickly cast his lot with hers.

He said, "I'm Kelly's brother, ma'am," and put Kelly down.

Jim Kahoe's voice came with a ghastly hollowness: "That boy saved our bacon last night, neighbor. Hope he ain't bad hit."

"Just weak from loss of blood," Chap explained. He made two pallets, one for Kelly and one for Kahoe. Kahoe sighed with relief when Chap had moved him.

"That rock was mighty hard, neighbor."

Chap said, "Let me look at your wound."

"It's been tended to, Annie done that. Ann," he turned his burning eyes on the girl, "will you step out and take a look at the river? I want to talk to this man."

The girl said anxiously, "Don't tire yourself, Pa," and then went out.

Kahoe looked up at Chap and said petulantly, "You're a tall man, neighbor, can't you get down lower?"

Chap said, squatting. "Better let me look at that bullet hole."

"No use; I'm done for and I know it. But I didn't want Ann to know 'till she has to. I didn't kill Dave Careen, neighbor—if he was killed."

"Kelly told me that," Chap said.

Kahoe's voice became almost fierce: "I want you to see that Ann gets her rights, neighbor! She thinks I'm her father, but I ain't. I'm her grandfather, same as Dave Careen was."

Startled, Chap exclaimed, "You got any record of that?"

"Jake Ginder has. He married my boy and Dave's girl. And Jeff Careen was a witness."

"That's hard to believe, Kahoe!" Chap said bluntly. "Mean as old Dave was, I know he'd never shoot his own son-in-law in cold blood."

"Dave didn't know they was married!" Kahoe raised himself on his elbow in his intensity. "He told me so yesterday, when I talked to him, just before he was shot, if he was shot. Dave had started back when we heard that gun. It sounded like it was down your way."

"I don't understand this, Kahoe. Reckon you must be a little out of your head."

"Dammit, I *ain't!* You see it was this way: My boy knowed Dave was against him marrying Dave's girl. They got married in Lodsetter and sent Jeff Careen out to take the word to old Dave. Jeff was to bring back word about how Dave took it, and if he was too mad they was goin' to leave the country for a while."

"That was sense, if they'd done it."

"But Jeff Careen didn't tell Dave they was married. Instead, he told him a mess

of lies about how Dave's girl was carryin' on with my boy, and how my boy was brággin' about it—"

Chap said hastily, "Jeff Careen never thought that up, Kahoe!"

"Jake Ginder done the thinkin'. You see he wanted Dave's girl himself. He hated my boy. But he didn't get Dave's girl after all, cause she left the country with me. I'd killed old Dave then if it hadn't been for her.

"But Dave Careen has paid for what he done. His life has been hell. He told me so. And he told me he was ready to do anything to make things right. You got to watch out for Jake Ginder, neighbor. He's wicked and he's cunnin'."

How wicked and how cunning, Chap was just beginning fully to realize.

"Why haven't you told your granddaughter who her parents was, Kahoe?"

"Blood feuds are bad!" said the dying old man. "I wanted to spare her the hell her mother went through while she lived. I didn't want Ann to know that her grandfather killed her fa—" he stopped as the girl came back into the cavern.

She said to Chap, "Is—is his wound very bad?"

"You done a fine job bindin him up, ma'am. Now I got to go. I got work to do. You keep close here, ma'am, cause they'll be lookin' for you, and keep Kelly quiet. There's grub in that bundle."

YES, Chap had work to do and little time to do it in. So far as Jim Kahoe was concerned, he knew it mattered little where he spent his last hours. Chap knew Kahoe's hours were numbered, but he couldn't leave Kelly in that dank hole. Kelly was too weak, too likely to contract fever. Besides, Chap knew Kelly wouldn't stay put.

Jake Ginder's shrewd cunning both amazed and enraged Chap. It was plain now. He and Jeff Careen were hand in glove. They had to kill old Dave after Kahoe returned to the scene, and old Dave got the facts of their treachery.

Chap understood now what Frenchie DeBolt had been doing up the valley. He had not been spying on him and Kelly. Instead, he had been lying in wait for Dave Careen, and got him!

Frenchie, Ginder and Jeff Careen, Chap knew, were all guilty as hell, yet he had not one tangible thing to hang on either of them. Ginder had planned well. The only mistake he had made had been in sending Kelly out to warn the Kahoes. Chap knew that Ginder and Jeff Careen had planned that, so they could wipe Kelly out with Kahoe. Kelly had been too much for them.

He tied Kelly's horse in the bushes above the ford, turned the claybank downstream and traveled fast, keeping a wary eye out for searching parties. He simply couldn't let himself be taken now, and he had little doubt but that Jeff Careen, or any of his men, would shoot him on sight.

Before the still smouldering ruins of Kahoe's cabin, he drew rein and considered. Kahoe had said the shot had come from down the valley; between their and Kahoe's cabin.

Chap crossed the gulch, dismounted and fought his way up the wall, the big claybank, climbing like a cat, behind him. On top, he found where a horse had been tied to a clump of brush and stayed there for some time, as was evidenced by the trampled ground and droppings.

And there in that trampled ground, he found something else—the half of a broken horseshoe—worn thin by long use and brightly polished.

Chap stared at the piece of iron with narrowed eyes. Frenchie DeBolt's horse had been limping when he passed the cabin yesterday. . . . Chap put the half-shoe in his breast pocket and buttoned the flap securely.

"Frenchie, my friend," he said grimly, "I think that will hang you!"

The ground here was still soft from the recently departed snow, and Chap had no difficulty tracking a man to a place on the gulch wall that gave a clear view of the trail below. Here the man had waited. Chap found half a dozen cigarette butts and an empty .30-30 rifle cartridge.

In an air line it was not more than two hundred yards to the spot where old Dave had been shot—point-blank range for a .30-30.

Chap took up the trail of the horse with the broken shoe. It led up into the rough country, and was exceedingly hard to follow. Chap realized that Frenchie was simply trying to hide his trail, so he gave it up and cut for the hide-out.

It was getting late and storm clouds were gathering back of the mountains. Twice, Chap heard the distant mutter of thunder.

HE RODE as fast as the rough terrain would permit. He was above the ford where he had left Kelly's horse when he hit the slide—a section of ground composed of a sort of blue shale, common in that part of the Morelocks, which sloped sharply down to the top of the river bank, then dropped sheer into the river.

Ordinarily Chap would have given the treacherous place a wide berth, but an old cow trail crossed the slide, so Chap decided to take a chance to save time.

He dismounted and started, leading the claybank. On all sides, except the lower, dense scrub-pine grew. Chap was halfway across the slide and watching his footing carefully when the claybank suddenly stopped and tossed up his head.

Just as Chap looked up, Jess Careen and two other riders appeared out of the low pines. Jess Careen carried a rifle across his saddle, and without a second's hesitation he threw the piece up and fired.

Chap saw the lick of red fire from the muzzle, then felt the impact of the bullet over his left breast. The smash of it picked him from his feet, and he struck the loose shale below the trail on his head and shoulders. Down he went, head-first, with bullets from Jess Careen's gun slashing all about him.

The drop was twenty feet, sheer into the river. Fortunately there was water enough to cushion his fall. He was conscious, but paralyzed from the waist up. The turbulent current swept him down, battering him against boulders, now on top, now on the bottom. He saw the big black boulder driving at him, made a feeble effort to shield his head. Then he hit head-on, and lost consciousness completely. . . .

When he came to, he was conscious of flashes and the splitting smash of thunder, the roar of a tremendous storm. He heard Kelly's voice: "I can't find a thing on him but a bump on his head, Ann! He's got half a horseshoe in his breast pocket and it's all bent."

Chap grinned in the darkness. Lucky horseshoe! Aloud, he said, "Where am I?"

Kelly's startled voice replied, "In the hide-out, Chap. Ann happened to see you floating by and pulled you out. What happened?"

Chap said, "I tried to cross a shale slide. . . ." He sat up. There was an agonizing soreness over his breast where the bullet had driven the horseshoe against his ribs. Otherwise he felt all right.

Something cold and creeping touched his hand. Water! Chap came up like he was stung, and stood listening to the fury of the storm.

"Let's have a look outside, Kelly, can you walk?"

"Sure. The old leg is a little game, but it will do to limp on."

At the mouth of the cavern the play of the lightning revealed a wild scene. The water there was deep and the growl of the rapidly rising river was audible above the roar of the storm.

Chap put his mouth close to Kelly's ear. "Kelly, we've got to get out of here. This place is a death-trap."

"How?" said Kelly. "The river is up two feet. This bank can't be climbed, and that water would batter a man to death in a minute."

Chap shucked his boots and six-shooter. Way back in the mountains, he knew, was a wall of water coming fast. He said, "If I can get out, I can let a rope down from the top and pull the rest of you out. Watch for the rope; you can see it durin' the lightnin' flashes."

He stepped into the current without giving Kelly time to protest. The river hit

Falling, he hit Chap. . . .

him like a blow. His feet were snatched from under him and the water took him like a cork. He fought, not to keep on top, but to keep his feet downstream so that collision with a boulder might not crack his skull.

THE roar of the river now drowned even the crashing thunder. He had a fleeting glimpse of the high bank speeding by, and he battled to keep as close to it as possible. At times, jagged lines of lightning skittered and blazed over the tossing waters.

The high bank lowered. A tree branch slapped his face. He snatched at it but it came away in his hand like a thread. Then, under a prolonged blaze of lightning, he saw his chance.

A small hemlock leaning out over the river almost horizontally, close enough so that he could reach it by throwing his arms high. He was driving straight at it.

The light went out. In the total blackness he reached up. A numbing blow, and then it seemed his arm would be torn from the socket. Like grim death he hung on and brought up the other arm, then slowly pulled himself free of the drag and suction of the current.

This was a small tree, studded with many branches growing at an angle which would hamper a man most, a painful thing on which to move. It whipped and swayed with him and seemed imbued with almost a human devilment, bent on hurling him back into the river.

He made the bank and fought his way up its low slope. Then he ran plunging upstream with blind, stumbling strides. He had little hope of finding the claybank, but he did hope to find Kelly's horse that he had left tied to the bushes a short way above the ford. If he couldn't—well, he wouldn't let himself think about that.

He found the horse, humped into a ball against the drilling rain torrents. With a single jerk he tore the rope from its fastenings and lunged back downstream.

It was not easy to judge the exact spot over which to play the rope, and it was a treacherous business, because the top here was wet and slimy earth.

He made three fruitless casts, holding the rope in position each time during two lightning flashes. At the fourth cast the rope was caught and tugged. Immediately he dug in and set himself for the work ahead.

Two tugs. He hauled up tentatively. There was a dead weight on the rope now. He leaned to the pull, wishing fervently for the high heels of his boots to dig in with.

Up came the weight, hand over hand, steadily. The rope became slimy with mud. Rain torrents blinded and smothered him. His wrists and fingers ached intolerably. It took grim courage to keep that rope coming up, and it seemed miles long.

Under a flash of lightning he saw the girl's white face below him, one hand reaching upward. He caught the hand and jerked her to safety, disengaged the rope and threw it back.

Again the tug, then an agonizing wait. Chap knew what was going on down there; a dispute as to who should come first. Finally came the signal to haul up.

It was harder this time for the weight was greater. Chap felt his fractured rib-ends grind together and a deathly sickness came upon him. Only the unyielding toughness that was in him enabled him to haul that weight up. He had a glimpse of Kelly's upturned face, then his grip failed. Slowly he felt the rope slip. "Grab at his hair!" he gasped.

The girl could not have heard him—the tumult of the elements was too ferocious. But she must have divined the truth, for with reckless abandon she threw herself flat and caught Kelly's hair. Instantly Chap abandoned the rope and caught her slender ankles and drew them

both up. Then he fell flat on his back, panting, his pulse booming in his ears.

Kelly put his mouth close to Chap's ear. "I tried to get him to come first!" he cried. "Hurry, Chap!"

Chap threw the rope back, but there was no answering tug. He waggled it, but only the roar of the river came back for an answer.

Patiently he waited. Somebody touched his arm. By the lightning flash he saw it was the girl. Her face was ghastly white, her eyes enormous in that eerie, blue-white light. She shook her head and signed for him to draw the rope up, then putting her face close to his, cried: "He's —not coming. I—I guess he wanted it this way."

Slowly Chap drew up the rope. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lid Off Hell

CHAP mounted the two of them on Kelly's horse and set out leading the horse. It was a long journey but the wild fury of the storm had spent itself. The rain still came, a steady downpour, but the lightning flashes were less vivid and the thunder was gone.

Gray dawn was leaking over this storm-lashed land when their cabin's solid bulk lifted ahead. Chap stopped the horse and raised his arms to lift the girl down, but dropped them suddenly. Smoke! His nostrils caught the scent. Instantly he took up the reins and led the horse down to the shed that formed one end of the corral. Kelly slid down unaided.

"What's wrong, Chap?" His voice was low so that the girl could not hear.

Chap did not reply at once, for in the shed he could make out the shapes of several horses. He put out an exploring hand. Saddled horses—not yet dry. Four of them! He ran a moistened finger over a forequarter brand. C-Bar!

Impatiently, Kelly said, "Chap, Ann is chilled to the bone."

Chap did not answer. Instead he ran his hand down the left foreleg of a saddled horse and tugged at the fetlock. Chap's exploring fingers ran over the hoof. He let it drop, snapped erect, and drew Kelly some distance away so the girl could not hear.

"Kelly, these are C-Bar horses. Jeff Careen and two or three of his gunmen was up in the hills when this storm hit. This was their closest shelter, so they made for it.

Kelly said hotly, "Well, what are we waitin' for? It's our place, ain't it? Here's your gun. I got mine and I can still shoot it. Let's put the hounds out of there."

"That's what I want to do, Kelly. Because the polecat that killed Dave Careen is one of them."

Kelly's voice was hard, "Name him, Chap!"

"I can't do that now, but he rode *this* horse. And there's another thing, Kelly. That girl there don't know it herself, but she's Dave Careen's granddaughter. She's his rightful heir. If we go in there now, there's bound to be a fight and if we go under, there won't be nobody to look out for her."

"Then we just got to stay on top! Here, take your gun," Kelly said.

Chap stuck the big weapon in the waistband of his pants. "All right, kid," he said grimly. "You do just what I tell you and we'll pry off this particular lid of hell, here and now!"

Kelly's grin was faint. He paused to speak to the girl. She nodded her head and kept to the saddle. Together the brothers stepped out into the rain, and advanced on the cabin.

The drum of the rain was their ally. Chap was still bootless. Noiselessly he approached the door, put his eye to the latch-string hole.

LIGHT burned palely inside the cabin. Before the stove two men sat talking. That was, unmistakably, Jeff Careen's big bulk that sat back to the door. And Jake Ginder faced him! Two men snored in the bunk.

Chap drew back, savage exultation in his whisper:

"Kelly, the Lord's bein' good to us! They're all there. Now do as I tell you. We got to save Jake Ginder to talk. Don't kill him unless you have to. I think I can get in through the lean-to. Wait till I'm in or the shootin' starts."

Like a gaunt, gray ghost then, Chap moved around the cabin. The lean-to door opened outward, and it's rain-soaked hinges moved without sound. A draft rattled the inside portal before Chap could close the door of the lean-to.

The voices of the two men were now audible. Ginder yawned. "Reckon I'd better get out of here before Chap comes home," he said with a laugh.

Jeff Careen laughed also, mirthlessly. "I wouldn't worry none about that, Jake. We happened to run across him up there on the river. It's that young one that's raised hell with our plans."

Ginder replied, "That's why I tried to get him out of the way. It's easy to figure a slow-wit like Chap, but the man never lived that could figure out what that damned Kelly would do. What do you mean, you *met* Chap up there?"

"I mean," replied Jeff Careen, "that he won't *ever* be comin' back here."

And just then Chap threw open the inner door.

CAREEN, facing him now, jerked his head up. His eyes protruded, his heavy jowls sagged and then his jaw snapped shut. "Hell's hinges!" he screamed, and reared up, drawing.

Chap's bullet took him square in the teeth, shoved him back. Falling, he struck Kelly as Kelly smashed through the front door. On the bunk, Frenchie DeBolt and McCoy exploded upright.

Chap lunged for Ginder, his gun clubbed. Ginder's move was abrupt as a mink's. He spun and shot up, point blank, into Chap's face as Chap's gun-barrel found the thin-thatched head. Chap and Ginder fell almost as one.

Stunned and blinded by the powder blast full in his face, Chap heard Kelly's gun break into a long, solid roar. Those on the bunk got in but a single, hurried shot. Then the cabin was pervaded by a deathly silence.

Chap did not know until then that he was on the floor. He heard Kelly's boot heel hit twice, felt Kelly's grip tugging to lift and turn him. Then Kelly's agonized voice crying, "My God, his face is half shot off!"

Chap knew it wasn't so, else he never would have heard Kelly. Almost petulantly he shoved Kelly away.

"Get some water!" he snapped. "I just got my eyes full of powder."

Kelly brought water, but it was softer hands than Kelly's that applied it to Chap's face. Kelly, so cool before the fight, now seemed entirely unnerved, but this girl was cool as the water she used.

"It's a bad burn," she said. "Can you see now?"

Yes, Chap could see again. Dimly at first, then more clearly. Kelly wheeled toward the door.

"McCloud's comin'."

Chap stepped over Jeff Careen's body and closed the door behind him. Mac McCloud sat on his horse and looked at him a full minute.

"Where's the rest of your crowd?" Chap's voice was scathing.

"I don't know where Jeff and a couple of his imported beauties are," McCloud replied. "The rest of them are down at the C-Bar."

"Why didn't you bring them up?"

McCloud exclaimed, "See here, Chap,

I been tryin' to help you, and Kelly too. We knew Kelly was in that nester's shack when we went up there night before last, and we knew it was his gun that done the damage. Jeff and Jake Ginder wanted to hang both of you. But I got the others to agree to let you and Kelly both off, if you'd turn that damned nester over to us. We aim to hang the man that killed old Dave."

Chap said, "Fair enough, Mac. Come down to the shed and I'll turn him over to you. But I don't reckon you'll want to hang him."

McCloud swung down and went with Chap silently. It was broad day now.

"Whose horse is that, Mac? I mean, who rides him?"

"Why, that's Frenchie DeBolt's horse."

"Then Frenchie's your man. He's the one that killed old Dave."

McCloud searched Chap's face. "You wouldn't try to run a shindy on *me,* would you, Chap. I'll admit that Frenchie DeBolt might kill anybody, if he had a reason. Why should he shoot old Dave?"

"For cash," said Chap succinctly. "I've got the deadwood on him, Mac, but I reckon we'll just let Jake Ginder do the explainin', before he goes to the gallows."

"We want Kahoe!" said Mac.

"Kahoe's dead, Mac. He don't need anybody's protection. Frenchie DeBolt is dead, too. So is McCoy and so," Chap's voice hardened, "is Jeff Careen."

McCloud said in an awed voice, "And Jeff thought you wouldn't fight! I wonder. . . ." Mac's voice trailed off, "I wonder who in hell I'll draw for a boss now!"

Chap's smile was crooked because of the powder burn. "Mac," he said slowly, "I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't one of the Sargent brothers."

Mac's look came quick and startled. *"You,* Chap?"

Chap sighed. "I expect it will have to be Kelly. But I'll be around to sort of ride herd on him—and the girl he's fixin' to marry."

THE END

The Deacon's Blood Breaks

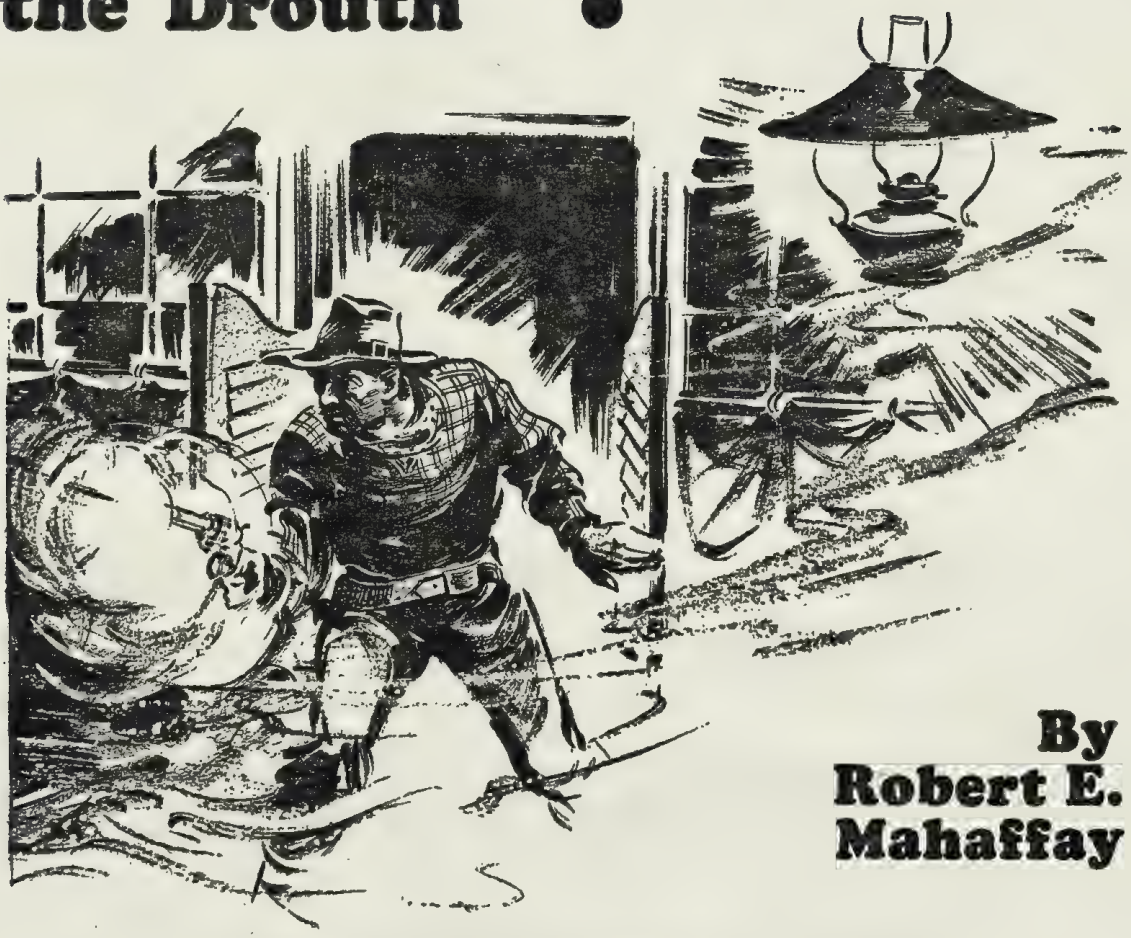
When young Rip Carson shot down a crooked tinhorn, the Deacon had just one way to save that youngster from manbreaking prison years: He must damn forever every one of his Latigo neighbors who had always put their faith in his preachments—and in the power of his famous guns!

CHAPTER ONE

Deacon Bottle Makes His Play

DEACON BOTTLE scowled at the brown and drouth-tortured hills which formed a barrier between his remote mountain cabin and the town of Latigo. Then he turned, as Mel Haycourt—the best friend he had in the world, unless it was Sheriff Enoch Star-

the Drouth



By Robert E. Mahaffay

Another Great "Deacon Bottle" Novel

ling, of Latigo—cleared his throat uneasily.

Haycourt, his face grim, said quietly, "It's dynamite, Deacon. They've got Enoch by the short hair, and they aim to finish him off."

Deacon Bottle didn't reply at once, but the scowl on his ordinarily moonlike face deepened visibly. He had known the range was burning up—but he hadn't heard of this.

"It'll take more'n a little wild talk to run Enoch out of office," he suggested. "Hell, this country never had a squarer sheriff."

Haycourt shook his head, staring at his grazing pony. "It's more'n just talk, man!" he snapped. "You know that for three months—before you an' Rip went back in the hills prospectin'—there ain't been a drop of rain. The range has been torched to a cinder; cowmen are bein' burned out of the country. . . ." He ran an outfit of his own, as the haunted look in his eyes testified. Then his open, calloused palm slapped against his thigh. "Damn it!" he exploded, "Here's Enoch slugged an' everyone sore at him—just because he was playin' square an' savin' a spring-poisoner from stretchin' hemp! Now Starling hasn't got a chance in a million of gettin' re-elected. . . . An' just when this county needs a good man, too. . . ."

There was a faintly puzzled smile on the Deacon's lips, but no mirth in his wise little eyes as he said, "Whoa up, son. Start in slow an' let me catch up. Now, what's this all about?"

Briefly, it was an incident which, the

Deacon realized, did indeed carry dynamite.

A few nights ago, a strange puncher had been caught attempting to poison Crazy Warrior Spring, north of Latigo, which was, in this desperate time, the entire water supply for the Jukes' spread, Silver Immelman's outfit, and several others. The water the springs afforded wasn't enough, but it was all they had to keep the herds alive. Then the Jukes' punchers had caught a strange cowboy attempting to poison the springs. They had not been gentle with him.

Sheriff Starling had arrived just in time to stop the strange cowboy—a whiskered individual who had given his name as Greeve—from decorating the nearest cottonwood at the hands of the angry Jukes punchers. Later, in the town jail. Starling got word that Ad Jukes was raking up every rider that could be spared, and was heading in to see that the would-be poisoner was hung, law or no law.

Characteristically, Sheriff Starling had given the man a break. Jukes and his hang-mob were boiling in front of the little jail when Starling slipped the cuffs from the man and helped him out the rear. . . .

"For bein' so damn fair about it," Haycourt finished, "Enoch got himself slugged while he was slappin' leather on a pair of broncs. They reckon this Greeve done it. The tricky son had made out he was so bad hurt he couldn't hardly walk —I told you the boys had mussed him up a little when they caught him at the Springs. Well, they found Starling in the corral, knocked cold. An' Greeve was gone—got plumb away!

Deacon Bottle whistled softly. "Ad Jukes always was knot-headed. It ain't Greeve he wants. Who was it put the son up to poisonin' that water?"

"Nobody knows. Let a range get into a jam an' the wolves start gatherin' to pull it down. That's what's happened here. An' it ain't finished. It's just begun. Looks to me like the whole deal was rigged to knock Enoch out of office."

"This country sure as hell can't be wrecked while he's ramroddin' it."

"Somebody's aimin' at just that!" exclaimed Haycourt vehemently. "It's goin' to take a solid sheriff to pull this range through. Let a crooked man slip into office an' he could have it torn apart in less than six months."

DEACON BOTTLE pushed away from the cabin front and let the gaze from his mild blue eyes drift down across the hills.

He was a big man, thick-muscled and wide of shoulder. His identifying black frock coat was off because of the heat, and his low-crowned black hat was pushed far back on his smooth forehead. Still belted, though, about his waist were the twin silver-mounted sixguns which had made him famous.

His status as a law-abiding citizen might be disputed; it might be said that his claim to being a man-of-God was fraudulent; but no one could deny his almost incredible skill with a six-shooter. And no man could say that he had refused to lend the aid of those guns when his friends or the range he loved were threatened.

"Enoch sent you up here?" he asked quietly.

"Hell, no!" exploded Haycourt. "Enoch's too damned mule-stubborn to ask anybody for help."

Deacon Bottle grinned. Enoch Starling, shaggy-headed and grizzled, had pulled him out of more holes than he liked to remember. "I'm in it, Mel. What can I do?"

Haycourt waited a long minute before he answered. "Right now," he said at last, "most of the cattlemen in this country would as leave hang Starling as

Greeve, if they had him. There's no more chance of his bein' re-elected than of a hawg sproutin' wings. An' if Starling goes, this range goes with him. You've preached plenty, Deacon, about hell-fire an' damnation. What's needed now, to pull Enoch an' this range out of one hell-roarin' jam is a preachment!"

"If it'll help," said the Deacon, "I'll sure give one to fit."

Mel Haycourt rubbed a hand along his knife-like jaw. "Latigo's due for a blow-up. Anybody who stands up with a good word for Enoch is apt to catch hell."

The mildness was gone from Deacon Bottle's moon-like face. He was thinking back over the past years. He had won a position of respect, though there were still those who considered him an outlaw and gunman. No one knew better than Deacon Bottle how fragile was the line of his acceptance. One wrong move now could jeopardize all that he had fought years to achieve.

But his voice, when he spoke, held a hint of anger. "To hell with 'em, Mel! I've made a balky crowd listen to me before, an' I can again."

Haycourt moved toward his horse. "I figgered you would, Deacon. I better hit for the Springs an' spread the word."

"Make it tonight," the Deacon said. "I'll wait till Rip gets back with the grub I sent him after, then I'll head down to Latigo."

Up in the saddle, Mel Haycourt looked queerly at the Deacon. Obviously fumbling for words, he said, "It's none of my business, Deacon—well, damn it, it is! I like that boy. An' right now you're lettin' him fuss with dynamite."

Deacon Bottle stared at him. "You mean Rip?"

"Yeah. He's got no business gamblin' in the Desert Eagle, or anywhere else. But I saw him there 'fore I came out."

The Deacon swore. "You mean to tell me Rig Haynes would—"

"Haynes don't own it no more. I told you Latigo wasn't the same. Gambler name of Kropp runs the place now." Haycourt swung his horse. "Don't let on to Rip I told you."

Deacon Bottle watched as horse and rider climbed out of the little basin which held the cabin. He went inside, got down the frock coat which was frayed the least, and began to brush it carefully. It had been a long time since he had delivered a preachment in Latigo. He wondered, a little grimly, if this one was going to be his last.

NEARLY an hour later Rip Carson returned. Deacon Bottle eyed him casually as the boy put up his horse and came trudging up from the corral with the saddlebags across a shoulder. It was almost five years now, the Deacon reflected, since he had adopted the homeless youngster.

Rip was better than fourteen, and the life he lived with the Deacon in the hills had made him lanky and tough-muscled so that he looked older. Hard sunlight had beaten his face dark and bleached his golden hair. Only his hazel eyes remained the same; they were bright and inquiring and friendly.

He was a boy no longer, the Deacon thought. He walked and rode like a man, he could turn out a man's work, and he wore the gun on his right hip like a man. It was an old Colt, worn and battered, but he knew how to use it.

Slicing potatoes into the skillet, Deacon Bottle inquired, "That Brownie horse's leg hold up all right?"

Rip tossed the saddlebags on the table. "It's as good as it ever was, Deacon. An' you can't hardly see, even, where it was fired."

"That's good." Deacon Bottle nodded toward the table. "What'd the stuff cost?"

Rip grinned. "Nothin'."

"That right?" The Deacon went on slicing potatoes. "Reckon I better send you in right along."

"Maybe you had," Rip chuckled. Moving importantly, he pulled a wad of folded bills from his pocket and spread them out on the table. "I picked up a little extra, too, to carry us along."

Deacon Bottle moved over and counted the bills gravely. There was twenty-five dollars in the pile. "What kind of game was it?"

"Blackjack."

The Deacon nodded. "Blackjack's a hard game to win at, if the house man knows what he's doin'. You must be quite a hand at it."

"I called 'em right, an' he called 'em wrong." Rip was enjoying himself immensely.

"Yeah? I've always had a hankerin' for blackjack, too, only I never figgered I was smart enough to outguess a gent who made his livin' at it. I'd admire to see how you do it."

Rip had lived with the Deacon long enough to recognize trouble when he saw it, and he said hastily, "I was a little lucky, maybe."

"Luck don't have much to do with it, if it's dealt right. Get those cards up on the shelf behind the stove."

There was a streak of hard stubbornness in Rip Carson. His jaw set, and he got the cards.

THE fire in the stove burned out unheeded. The cards flowed under the Deacon's pudgy fingers, and the look in Rip's hazel eyes changed from stubborn determination to uncertainty, and then to angry recklessness. Now he was watching blackjack that was no fun.

The cards mocked him. If he stood on eighteen, the Deacon hit seventeen and added a deuce. If he gambled that the Deacon would go broke, the Deacon calmly took his money on seventeen. He won what the Deacon said he would win, and lost the figure, to the dollar, which the Deacon predicted.

When it was over, Deacon Bottle said, "I ain't tellin' you not to gamble. You got to decide that. But I am tellin' you that only a sucker bucks a game if he don't know as much about it as the man that's dealin' it."

He proceeded then to show Rip the intricacies of a switched cut, pin-pricked cards, roughened cards which the light exposed as clearly as if they had been dealt face up; the trick of setting up a deck in the shuffle, and the knack of bottom dealing.

Sober interest elbowed most of the anger out of Rip's face. "An' that's what that fast-fingered gent in the Desert Eagle was doin' to me?" he demanded.

Deacon Bottle was thinking fast. The Desert Eagle meant this new man, Kropp. "I didn't see it," he said, "but if you walked out of there with twenty-five bucks plus eatin' money, somebody had a reason for lettin' you."

"Deacon, I'm goin' back there!"

Deacon Bottle shook his head. "Son, it ain't you Kropp wants back there. It's me."

Rip was silent, and the Deacon's brows drew together. "He figgered, I reckon, that I'd come rampagin' in there, ready to take the place apart because he'd let you gamble in it."

Rip's pride was hurt, and he was angry. "I'll do my own payin' off, Deacon!"

"No," said the Deacon sharply. "You're not goin' back there, an' I'm not either—not right off, anyhow." He eyed Rip shrewdly. "What kind of talk did you hear about Starling?"

Rip was instantly all eagerness. "He's sure up against it, Deacon. An' a feller at the bar was sayin' that the only man in the whole country who'd side him was you. How about it, Deacon? You goin' to?"

For a long moment the Deacon was silent. Somehow, in a way that he couldn't decipher, this gambling affair of Rip's tied in with Enoch Starling's jam. With drought to swing the thing on, plans had been laid for taking over the Latigo range. It had been forecast that he would back Starling, and a net had been woven to include him—the Deacon.

He heard Rip saying again, "You goin' to side Starling, Deacon?"

Deacon Bottle drew a long breath. "I reckon so," he said. "I figgered I was through gamblin', but it looks like I was wrong."

CHAPTER TWO

Desert Eagle Death-Trap

THE two had little to say on the long ride in, and the Deacon abandoned himself to dogged speculation. Rip grew tighter and more hard-jawed, as if a spring within him were being wound.

He said once, "If that gambler was stackin' the deck on me, why'd he let me win?"

"You'd be more anxious to go back," the Deacon told him. "an' I'd be madder."

"But by goin' in there I dragged you into a jackpot. Is that right?"

Deacon Bottle shook his head absently. "It's a deeper game than that. But what the angle is, I ain't figgered out myself yet."

It was late in the afternoon when Deacon Bottle and Rip Carson rode into Latigo. Heat lay in a stifling blanket over the town. Out on the range that heat had crisped grass, devoured water; and here, too, the life seemed to have been burned away.

The dusty street was all but deserted. Warped and heat-cracked buildings crouched against it as if cowering sullenly under the lash of the sun.

A man lounging in futile awning shade as they rode past called out, "Howdy, Deacon. Mel Haycourt claimed you'd likely be givin' a preachment."

The Deacon tried to muster a grin. "One was about due, seemed like to me. We better tap one of Haynes' whiskey kegs 'fore that dries up, too. Tell folks it'll be tonight."

In front of the combination sheriff's office and jail he swung ponderously out of the saddle. "Better take the broncs on down to the stable," he suggested to Rip. "I'll be waitin' here for you."

The face of Sheriff Enoch Starling had changed. Seamed and wind-burned, it had grown old in a matter of days. Bristling gray brows couldn't hide the look of bleakness which had come into his eyes.

The width of his brawny shoulders seemed lessened, somehow, as he came up from behind the desk. He said accusingly, "I told Mel not to drag you into this."

"Nobody's draggin' me."

"Then get out! Damned if I'll have you hornin' in on a job that belongs to me." Starling tried to make his voice sound wrathful, and didn't quite pull it off.

"Go to hell," said the Deacon, grinning. "There's no law says a man can't bust out with a preachment when he feels like it. You still got nothin' but saddle soap in that lower drawer, or did you bed down a bottle in it, like I told you to?"

Starling grunted. "I should have stayed with the soap." He rattled open the drawer, nevertheless, and set out a bottle and glasses.

Deacon Bottle beamed at the label. Old Pepper was his favorite, in spite of its notoriety as a whiskey of staggering potency.

"Somebody sold you on drinkin' a whiskey you can taste, eh, Enoch?"

"Drink it?" growled Starling. "You can't even use it for boot polish—eats out

the seams. I'm tellin' you, Deacon, this water-hole business is nothin' for you to mix into. Put a drink under your belt an' get out of Latigo till it's over."

"Just so I can look on while some smart devil busts this range, an' then buys it up for tobacco papers an' bottle corks?"

"Sheriff or not," said Starling softly, "nobody'll do that while I'm alive!"

"Somebody sure as hell is makin' a stab at it. An' he's blame near done it. Maybe you've got a notion what his name is."

Sheriff Starling's face had hardened, but he said, "I've got nothin' the law could back."

DEACON BOTTLE took a long drink and coughed contentedly. "Might be, then, we'll have to weasel around the law a little. Ever see this feller Greeve before?"

"Nope. He was a plumb stranger. An' damn' if I can figger where he disappeared to. I checked hosses an' tracks an' run a comb through the town till I was black in the face. He just stepped out of sight."

"Nothin' hurts whiskey more than settin' around open," declared the Deacon irrelevantly, reaching for the bottle. "If it's good likker it draws flies, an' if it's bad likker it just evaporates. What do you know about this feller Kropp?"

"Not much." Starling spread his hands, but Deacon Bottle didn't miss the gleam of anger in his old eyes.

"Ever think of puttin' a sixgun under his chin an' askin' him to talk?"

Starling said quietly, "He hit town a month or so back. Had some money. How he got hold of the Desert Eagle I ain't sure, but I got a hunch he beat Haynes out of it at poker. Maybe crooked poker. Haynes won't say."

"If I was aimin' to sell a town on a new sheriff," said the Deacon deliberately, "I'd get hold of a place where I could pass out free drinkin'-likker, while I talked folks into it."

Starling's weather-roughened face flushed. "That's what he's been doin'."

"How does he stand with the range crowd?"

"Aces," admitted Starling. "He called the turn on this dry spell an' optioned all the winter feed in sight. 'Stead of tryin' to make a killing on it he claims he's goin' to sell it back at a fair price."

"Bread on the water, like it says in the Good Book," said the Deacon grimly. "You sure there's nothin' at all you can pin on Kropp?"

"Not a damn thing. He—"

Starling didn't finish. Two sounds which both recognized as the concussion of shots broke through the hot stillness of early evening. Both men swung out of their chairs. Neither spoke.

Out on the walk, Deacon Bottle saw a man knock open the door of the Desert Eagle Saloon with the heel of his hand, stare out and shout something. Four or five townsmen had begun to lope toward the saloon.

Deacon Bottle broke into a run, his heart hammering suddenly into his throat. He looked for Rip Carson along the street, and didn't see him.

Starling, plunging at his side, jerked out, "It's the Eagle! If Kropp—"

Deacon Bottle heaved the swinging doors apart with a thrust of his shoulder. The first flashing sweep of his eyes picked up the scene in detail before they rested on Rip Carson.

THE evening trade had been slim. No more than half a dozen people had been in the saloon, and two of them had been on the opposite side of the room; they were coming across through the tables now toward the bar.

It was directly under the bar that the man lay on the floor.

The Deacon got a hasty glimpse of his

face. The blood had drained out of it, leaving it a pasty white. He wore a black string tie and a sweat-stained white shirt, and the spreading blotch of crimson over his heart was testimony enough that he was dead.

Kneeling at his side was a man in a thin, dark coat. Only the back of his head showed. Light gleamed against a fringe of shining black hair topped by a bald skull. The dark-coated man, apparently, was trying to work the little double-barreled derringer from the dead man's hand, but the fingers had closed about it in such a tenacious grip that they couldn't be pried away.

That much Deacon Bottle saw as he went with long strides to the bar and the side of Rip Carson.

Rip still held the old Colt. He had taken a backward step after the shooting and had come up against the bar; he stood there as if pinned to it, his thin face frozen in a look of dismay and disbelief and fright.

The Deacon heard Starling's growled question, and heard a voice that was level and controlled reply, "One of my dealers, Sheriff. He's dead."

Deacon Bottle put his hand on Rip's shoulder. "Steady, son. You hurt?"

Rip couldn't find any words. He slid his left hand inside his shirt.

Behind them, Starling snapped another question. The cool voice said, "The derringer's mine. I loaned it to him this morning. He'll take it into his grave with him I suppose, unless the fingers are broken. It doesn't matter."

Rip pulled his hand out from under his shirt. He looked at the blood on it and then at the Deacon.

Deacon Bottle swung around. "Enoch, what—?"

The man in the dark coat had straightened and was facing Starling squarely. The Deacon didn't need to be told that this was Kropp.

The face was lean and thin-boned, and the forehead rising to the bald skull made it seem incredibly long. His eyes, which were a jet black, seemed to have the same glistening quality as his fringe of hair—as if they too had been oiled.

Enoch Starling exclaimed savagely, "Your man pulled a gun on this boy, an' got himself shot! That's what happened, isn't it?"

Kropp's stare d'dn't waver, nor did his voice rise. "Do you think this boy would be alive now if my man had had a chance to draw first?"

The Deacon didn't think so, but he flung away the reflection with a curt jerk of his head. "Rip was hit, Enoch. I'm takin' him over to Doc Sykes. Is it all right with you?"

Starling nodded jerkily. He went on firing brusque questions at Kropp as the Deacon took Rip to the door. Rip walked without difficulty, holding a hand against his shirt. Pain showed in his face, but stronger in it was a look of bewildered strain.

He said chokingly, "I—I sure wasn't fixin' to kill him, Deacon."

"I know it, kid. Take it easy. No rush about this. Doc Sykes. . . ."

DUSK shadowed the boy's face. He was fighting to down the emotion that brimmed into his hazel eyes. "I aimed to tackle him with my—my fists," he burst out. "That's what I went in there for. I—I didn't want you saddled with a job I'd started. He wasn't much bigger'n me. So I went in."

"Kropp saw it all, did he?"

"Yeah, he was there. I reckon he saw it."

Deacon Bottle scowled through the dusk. "Rig Haynes see it too?"

"Maybe. I dunno. That dealer was standin' there, an' I went up to him an' told him I was goin' to beat hell out of him for riggin' that blackjack game on

me. He was a mean cuss, Deacon. We talked some, gettin' madder, I guess, an' then all at once he had that gun in his hand. I was lookin' right at it, Deacon! I made a grab for my gun, an' I saw the smoke bulge out of his, only I didn't hear a thing. Then I shot, an' he kind of fell up against the bar an' dropped."

Deacon Bottle bit his lip. Rip knew how to handle a gun, but not well enough to match an experienced gunner who took the first shot. He wasn't good enough to put in a finishing shot after he had been knocked off balance by the shock of a heavy derringer slug.

"He pulled first?" the Deacon said, and tried not to let the doubt show in his voice. "You're sure of that?"

"He did, Deacon! Honest to God, he did!"

They were at the gate of Sykes' little cottage, and the Deacon turned in. Wizened little Doc Sykes came to the door, peering out sourly into the near dark.

"Deacon? Thought you was in jail. If you wasn't, it was only because—"

The Deacon pushed past him. "There's a slug in Rip, Doc. Get it out."

"Why in hell didn't you say so? Stand there blattin' like a damn fool-faced woollie!" Sykes could move fast when he wanted to. "Get your shirt off, son. It ain't in your legs, I reckon, or you wouldn't be walkin'."

He stretched Rip out on the bare plank table which served him during operations, and stripped away the bloodstained shirt.

One look at the boy's wiry torso and he flung a scornful oath at the Deacon. "Oh, hell! Next thing you'll be runnin' to me to get your fingernails trimmed!"

The taut hardness vanished from around the Deacon's mouth, and he swore softly. The dull lead of the bullet was visible. It had hardly more than broken the skin over Rip Carson's ribs.

That explained the fact that there had been no bullet shock; Rip could have done what he claimed he did. A large-calibered derringer slug was heavy and powerful enough to knock a man down, but by some miracle this one had stopped after little more than drawing blood.

Miracles of that kind, the Deacon was well aware, didn't just happen. He picked up the torn shirt. That bullet had been fired at point-blank range; the cloth around the hole was pitted with powder burns.

CHAPTER THREE

A Corpse for the Deacon

DEACON BOTTLE let himself out into the full dusk of evening. Rip was in the custody of Doc Sykes, and would remain there until this was over.

Impatience was riding the Deacon hard, but he didn't hurry on his way back to the Desert Eagle. There was something he ought to know that he didn't know—some key that would make all of this fall into a logical line. He was still struggling with the problem when he turned in through the swinging doors of the saloon.

Trade had picked up. Men nodded and spoke. That put a certain core of hard satisfaction in the Deacon. Word had spread that he was to deliver one of his rare and almost legendary preachments, and the Latigo range was turning out for it. There was that much power still in his name.

Deacon Bottle edged into a corner of the bar and waited until Rig Haynes came to set whiskey before him. Haynes was chunky and dark. Taciturn always, he was wholly silent now. There was a tight-lipped look to his face; he was sullen and he was afraid.

"What's wrong, Rig?" asked the Deacon softly.

The bartender didn't lift his eyes above the top button of Deacon Bottle's flowered vest. "Nothin's wrong."

"What was that card dealer's name?"

"Dan Tobin."

"He pulled first, didn't he?"

Haynes said slowly, forcing the words, "I didn't see it."

"Don't tell me you're deaf, too, Rig. There were two shots. They didn't sound the same. Which one came first?"

The barkeep's face reddened. "I didn't see anything or hear anything, I tell you!" he exclaimed fiercely.

There was the brush of boots behind the Deacon. A cool voice which registered instantly murmured, "Rig didn't, but there's two or three others that did. Maybe you'd like to talk to them?"

Deacon Bottle turned deliberately. Kropp was smiling, but the oily surface of his jet-black eyes was humorless.

"I figgered," said the Deacon, "that you'd be the one to do the talkin'."

Kropp chuckled deep in his throat. "They didn't lie when they told me about you, Deacon. I'll talk. Come along."

Deacon Bottle fell in behind him as he threaded a way to one of the private rooms at the rear. Half way to it, two men detached themselves from the crowd to stride at his elbows. He had seen them before; they were the two men who had been across the room when the dealer, Dan Tobin, was shot.

Once in the rear room, they sauntered with a studied and significant casualness to opposite corners of the room.

Kropp set out a bottle and glasses, and nodded at the man on the Deacon's left. He was tall, with a bony, straight-mouthed face. "Meet Bart Cripping, Deacon—Latigo's next sheriff!"

The Deacon said nothing, and Kropp smiled. "Rig Haynes has told me about your preachments, Deacon. I'm anxious to hear one."

Deacon Bottle said grimly, "Go ahead and talk!"

"All right." When he wasn't smiling, Kropp's long face had a searching, predatory quality. "Starling is through as sheriff in Latigo. Why? Because there's money to be made here in the next year, and I'm going to make it. I want a man I can trust ramroddin' the law. You'd guessed all that."

"That's right."

"Maybe by now you've guessed the rest of it. Maybe your preaching carries the weight Haynes says it does; maybe it doesn't. I couldn't take a chance. If you'd come in here this afternoon, you wouldn't have gone out again alive. Your boy came instead. That was a mistake, but not as bad a one as I thought at first."

Kropp paused with his glass halfway to his lips. "All the witnesses to that shooting, Deacon, are my witnesses."

DEACON BOTTLE saw the two gunmen in the corners go tense, but not even the sight of them checked the red anger sweeping through him. "Frame that boy," he said hoarsely, "and I'll kill you if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Kropp nodded coolly. "You could kill me," he said, "but it wouldn't help the kid."

That wasn't the way out, and the Deacon should have known it. He watched Kropp, watched him with his blue eyes like frozen metal while helpless rage stormed in his brain.

Kropp's voice was very soft. "There's no need for it to turn out the wrong way. The witnesses can swear that Tobin pulled first. He took his shot, and missed, and the boy killed him. Simply self-defense. There's a price for that, of course."

"Name it, damn you."

"This preachment of yours, now. Your crowd is going to be blood-hungry to start with. Instead of bucking it—only a damn fool would try that, anyhow—you're going to tell 'em what they want to hear. Enoch Starling is nine-tenths damned now, and you're going to finish it!"

Deacon Bottle could feel his arms trembling. Kropp's high forehead was a target he wanted to put a bullet into. He had to struggle with that impulse, fight it down.

Kropp was studying him shrewdly. "It won't be so bad, Deacon. Starling knows he hasn't got a chance. And you'll be set with this range for the rest of your life. You'll be tellin' 'em what they already believe. You'll be a hero!" He paused, and his voice became a snarl. "Well, what about it?"

Deacon Bottle's throat was so choked he couldn't speak, but he shook his head.

Kropp leaned across the table, his drawling calm changed to savage command. "Get out of here, Deacon! Get out and add up the answer. It's that boy of yours against an old man who's finished anyhow! You'll give your preachment when the time comes, but you'll give it *my* way! Clear out of here now and think it over. Move!"

Never in his life had the Deacon been so cornered that a man could talk to him as Kropp was doing. He took the lash of the words, took the sneering triumph behind them. He turned away from Kropp, his jaw set like a granite block.

Outside, the bustle and hubbub of the rapidly filling saloon didn't touch him. He stalked through it, answering automatically when his name was spoken. Only one picture cut through to him—it was the harried and bitter face of Rig Haynes behind the bar.

For a long time the Deacon stood in the dark shadows of the street while the whipped-up fury in him ran its course. He understood that gunplay in that back room would have meant utter ruin, but he cursed himself for not forcing it, regardless.

This was bigger than a balance between Rip Carson and Sheriff Enoch Starling. It was a balance between Rip and the whole Latigo range!

Deacon Bottle was thinking of the expression of beaten stubbornness in Starling's eyes. A long breath rasped in his lungs. All he had to do was double-cross Starling. For Rip Carson.

Deacon Bottle let his pudgy hands drop to the butts of his guns. The implacable resistance of the metal against his grip steadied his thinking, hardened the metal within him for the choice he had to make. The gamble here must be played through to the end.

DEACON BOTTLE stared down the street toward Starling's office. Light shown from the window. Mel Haycort, probably, had reached Latigo by this time and was there.

The Deacon turned abruptly in the opposite direction and made his way rapidly along the dark walk. He scrutinized the store fronts as he passed them, and came to a halt at length, throwing a sharp look beyond and across the street.

Though the place was unlighted there was enough illumination so that the legend on the window, "Latigo Funeral Parlors," could be distinguished. An intricate knowledge of locks was one of the things Deacon Bottle never admitted, but one blade of his knife was filed, not accidentally, to needle-like slimness.

A minute's careful probing, and the door clicked open. Deacon Bottle let himself in, groped his way across the room. He felt for an inner door, found it and went through. Only then did he scratch a match and walk with it to a table which held a lamp.

In spite of the muggy heat which enveloped the town, this room seemed clammy. The back of the Deacon's neck was crawling as he walked with the lamp to the back of the room where the sheet-covered figure lay.

The Deacon's mouth was a grim line as he pulled the sheet back. Dan Tobin's eyes had been closed. The flesh of his white face was stretched unnaturally tight

against the bones. On his right cheek was an ugly bruise, sustained, the Deacon guesed, when he had fallen against the bar.

It was the derringer still gripped in his right fist which claimed the Deacon's attention. He couldn't pry it loose, but he could remove the cartridges. One of them had been fired. The other he held close to the lamp, grunting with satisfaction as he saw the knife marks in the lead close to the case.

It required only a moment's work with his own knife to force out the lead again and pour the powder charge into the palm of his hand. Then he had the answer to the bullet which should have tunneled through Rip Carson and had actually only broken the skin.

Most of the powder in both cartridges had been removed.

Deacon Bottle brushed off the powder on his trousers, frowning. It was Kropp's gun. Kropp had given it to Dan Tobin. Tobin, then, had been scheduled to enter a fight with the Deacon, armed only with a useless gun. Other gunmen in the room might have downed the Deacon, but death, too, would have been Tobin's certain portion.

Kropp had wanted Tobin killed. He had got what he wanted, but not in the way he expected.

Again there crept over Deacon Bottle the feeling that there was something in this that he was missing. The Deacon pulled in breath for an explosive oath, and turned back the sheet which he had replaced. He was staring down at Dan Tobin when he heard the faint scrape of a boot sole.

"Don't move, Deacon! Don't move at all."

The Deacon's head jerked. In the doorway stood the second of the two gunmen who had flanked him going in for the talk with Kropp. Stubby and thickset, he was grinning, and the gun in his fist was steady as a rock. He came toward the Deacon warily and deliberately.

"Find what you were lookin' for, Deacon?"

Deacon Bottle nodded at the body on the table. "Somebody," he said calmly, "made a hell of a mistake. This man ain't dead."

And as the gunman's eyes jumped for the fraction of a second, Deacon Bottle hit the lamp with the back of his hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

Preachment for Wolves

THE gun spoke with a muted roar, and the lead whispered over the Deacon's back as he lunged in. His shoulder hit the gunman in the midriff; air exploded out of the man's lungs as he jackknifed.

He was down, thrashing furiously, with the Deacon on top of him. The Deacon was no rough-and-tumble novice. While his left hand found the gun and clamped over it, he hammered savagely with his right fist and both knees. It was the fist at last which crashed like a maul against the gunman's jaw, pounding him into limp unconsciousness.

Deacon Bottle tore the sleeves from his shirt, binding and gagging him. He lit the lamp then and took one more look at the body of Dan Tobin.

The gunman was still unconscious when he let himself cautiously out onto the walk and went with long strides for Starling's office. Mel Haycort, as he had guessed, was there. At an angle which concealed him from Starling, the Deacon stood on the walk and beckoned.

Haycort muttered an excuse presently, got up and sauntered out. "Deacon," he asked grimly, "there any hope at all?"

"Some," the Deacon admitted. "We'll kind of have to go around Enoch." He went on talking sharply and rapidly.

Mel Haycort swore. "Tote that gent's carcass into the Desert Eagle?"

"I'll give you the sign. That gunhawk of Kropp's was tied up when I left. Watch him. An' get Starling over to the Desert Eagle for the preachment. He won't want to go, but get him there. Tell him it'll maybe wind up in a gun fight, an' I'll need him."

Haycort grunted blasphemous agreement. He wheeled and stepped back into Starling's office.

Deacon Bottle headed slowly for the Desert Eagle. There was in him a curious reluctance, something he had never experienced before. It was as if a premonition he couldn't deny had taken subtle hold of him, warning that this preachment was to be his last. It wasn't going to be the preachment that Kropp expected, and the Deacon wondered, with cold doubt touching his heart, if he would even live to finish it.

Just outside the swinging doors he hesitated again, knowing there was still time to back out.

He shrugged his wide shoulders and stepped through, and when he did that he was the old Deacon Bottle, the figure which the Latigo country had come to admire and respect and love.

There was a grin on his bland, moon-like face. His black frock coat, a little rusty and patched in spots, was buttoned across his thick paunch. His low-crowned black hat was tilted to the back of his head. He was Deacon Bottle who had a knack with words, a reckless capacity for Old Pepper whiskey, and a gun-skill which was legendary.

The full power of his deep voice rolled through the roar of the crowd: "Belly up, boys! There's a dry spell comin' up, when we hit the preachment, an' we better get set for it."

He grinned at Rig Haynes. "Rig, I always did figger you squared up your profit an' loss for the year when I was buyin'. Let me off with a new roof this time, an' I'll call myself lucky!"

There was a concerted guffaw and a surge for the bar. The Deacon was swept with it. Hands reached out to pummel his shoulders. Men shouted at him, chuckled, proposed toasts. The Deacon's popularity was clearly indicated.

During that moment the spectre of a range being torched into ruin was forgotten.

As soon as he could, the Deacon worked through the jam to the lower end of the bar where Kropp was standing.

Kropp said evenly, "Maybe Rig Haynes was right. What you tell this crowd they'll come mighty close to believin'. Made up your mind yet?"

The Deacon shrugged. "A little fresh air clears a man's head. There isn't much choice, I reckon. You'll clear Rip?"

"When it's over," said Kropp.

THE Deacon downed a drink which Haynes, sweating like a horse, set in front of him. "That's fair enough. I was thinkin' it might be a good idea to open the meetin' with a word or two about Dan Tobin. Funeral oration, sort of. A crowd like this has got to be handled kind of easy. It'd set the tone an' get folks sobered down for what was comin'."

Kropp considered that silently.

"If you can start folks feelin' sorry for somebody or somethin', they're easier to handle," the Deacon went on. "No reason why they shouldn't feel sorry for Tobin. You knew him, o' course, an' I didn't. If you was to say a word or so first, buildin' him up—friends, an' that sort of thing—I could pick it up an' get started right."

Kropp's teeth showed in a bleak grin. "I'll do that, Deacon. But remember this—Rip won't be cleared until it's over. An' when I finish talkin', he'll need clearing bad!"

Lines showed in Deacon Bottle's face as he looked at Kropp then. For a moment the bitter strain he was under was revealed in his expression.

"It's a rigged deck," said Kropp softly. "Play your cards right, Deacon."

Deacon Bottle moved back along the bar. He had another drink, and then Rig Haynes was hammering for silence with a bung-starter. Voices called out hoarsely; hands seized the Deacon and boosted him up atop the bar.

He swung around there, got his footing and braced himself on pillared legs, looming high over the crowd. It was tradition that his silver-mounted guns should support his words, and he drew them, with a grin, from leather.

The babble of talk and scrape of boots sifted gradually down to silence. It was a moment when a queer anticipatory tightness held the crowd and put a lump into the Deacon's throat.

"Folks," he began, and his voice wasn't as steady as it might have been, "the first thing I'd like to do is pay tribute to the memory of a man who died here not much more'n an hour ago. A mistake was made, and as a result of it, a good man is dead. Dan Tobin, his name was. I didn't know Tobin as well as some of you others, an' I'm goin' to ask Mr. Kropp to tell us what kind of a man he was. Mr. Kropp?"

Kropp hooked his elbows over the bar. His jet-black eyes ran shrewdly over the craning audience.

"Thank you, Deacon." His voice was very cool and very steady. "I knew Dan Tobin. Knew him as well as one man can know another. He was a gambler, but a square one, which is the reason I sent for him when I located here. Two brothers couldn't have been closer. Having brought him here I feel, in a sense, directly responsible for his—his death. I can only hope that it will prove to have been a mistake."

Deacon Bottle nodded his gratitude. "How big a mistake it was," he said, "not even Dan Tobin knew."

He paused, his blue eyes scouring the crowd. He had Kropp spotted almost below him at the bar. Over to the left, back against the wall, stood the gunman, Bart Cripping. Somewhere along the back, probably, were one or two more of Kropp's gunhawks. They were spread, and had the Deacon targeted.

Sheriff Enoch Starling had come in. He was by himself in a corner, his seamed face set stonily.

"I don't need to tell any of you," resumed the Deacon, "that in the last three months this range has been dipped in hell. More than that, there's been wolves stalkin' it like they'd stalk calves in a blizzard."

There was a rumble of oaths from the audience.

THE Deacon held up his hand. "There'd never be a better chance to break this range. One man knew that. You all know what happened at Crazy Warrior Springs. The gent who tried to poison that water earned a hangin', but he didn't get hung! An' why didn't he?"

Heads were turning. Enoch Starling had drawn himself up straight as a gun barrel in his corner.

"Your sheriff wouldn't stand for it," the Deacon boomed. "He brought this feller—Greeve, his name was—down to Latigo for a trial. Only there wasn't any trial. Greeve got clean away. An', boys, I'm sayin' here an' now that Greeve couldn't have escaped, if Sheriff Enoch Starling *hadn't wanted him to!*"

The Deacon saw Starling's face turn ashy white. Kropp settled back, the ghost of a smile on his thin lips. A murmur began, rose almost to a roar. Only the pealing of the Deacon's voice checked flaming disorder.

"Hold it, boys! There's more to come! Starling was smart enough to know that Greeve didn't count. The man he wanted was the man who'd hired Greeve to do the job!"

Someone in the crowd shouted, "He lost 'em both!"

Deacon Bottle stopped the cry before it could be taken up. "Not Starling!" He shot a glance at Kropp, and the muzzle of his gun went with it. The oily blackness of Kropp's eyes was hot. "Starling was the one man knew where Greeve was hidin' out! An' he's got him for you now!" He nodded toward the front door without taking his eyes from Kropp.

There was a bustle and stir and a parting of the crowd. Through the opening came Mel Haycort and big Addison Jukes. They carried a sheet-wrapped figure between them, stretched it on the bar at the Deacon's feet and pulled back the sheet.

Kropp snarled with scornful wrath, "Greeve, hell! That's my dealer, Dan Tobin!"

"It's Tobin, right enough, but it's Greeve too! Look for yourselves, boys. See how white his face is? He had a beard, remember. He came here an' Kropp shaved him. Look at that bruise on his cheek. He didn't get that fallin' against the bar when he died—it's too old. Greeve took a beatin' up at the Springs. How did Tobin get his ribs kicked black an' blue, like they are? Greeve was haired-over like a wolf, Haycort told me. Look at Tobin!"

Men surged in a jam against the bar. Those at the back fought and stretched for a look.

It was Kropp, his rage controlled, who said at last, coldly, "They may be one and the same. It doesn't concern me if they are. Whatever Tobin did—calling himself Greeve—he did before he came to me. I knew nothing about it."

"Wrong!" snapped the Deacon. "You murdered him so he couldn't be discovered and made to talk!"

"That's a lie!"

Deacon Bottle jerked his head. "Take Tobin out boys." Then, a moment later: "I'll prove it—or Doc Sykes will. He'll testify what Tobin's bullet did to Rip Carson. Your derringer, Kropp, that you gave Tobin, was worse than none at all. You'd taken the powder out of the shells. If Tobin walked into a fight—and you'd rigged that, too—he was bound to die. It was you murdered Tobin, not Rip!"

Kropp moved a little away from the bar. "We'll clear that up here and now." His hands were hanging loose at his sides. "Your boy killed Tobin. Shot him down without a chance. There are witnesses to prove—"

FROM behind him came the rasp of metal against wood. It was Rig Haynes, his blunt face tight with strain, pushing a double-barreled shotgun across the bar.

"I was a witness," he said. "That boy of yours, Deacon—that Rip Carson—he didn't pull first. Tobin did. I don't give a damn what happens to me. Any you gun-totin' hardcases want to argue that with an iron, get started!"

Kropp stood motionless, running a tongue over his lips.

And into the taut quiet broke a man's shout. It came from the front of the saloon where a man whose nose and mouth and jaws were dark with dried blood stood on buckling legs. Pure hate was in his eyes. It was the stubby gunman whom the Deacon had left at the undertaker's.

His gun flipped up recklessly, slammed out a slug, straight at the Deacon.

Instantly the room was taken over by roaring confusion. Deacon Bottle plunged straight forward, falling with a grinding crash to the floor of the saloon.

He didn't see the fight that followed. Haynes, of course, had been bluffing with his scattergun. To have used it would have meant general slaughter. Instead, he switched his grip, swung the stock at Kropp's head.

Kropp had snaked out a revolver, was dancing away for a shot at the Deacon. He had the only gun out in that end of the room, and for those fleeting seconds he held the crowd off. It was Enoch Starling who came charging through the crowd like a bull. It was Starling who took Kropp's fire while he pumped three slugs through Kropp's chest.

Bart Cripping had made a half-hearted move to join the fight, a move which died when one of Addison Jukes' bullets broke his shoulder.

Mel Haycort came cramming through to where the Deacon lay. What he would have said will never be known. One of the Deacon's eye-lids dropped in a wink, and Haycort understood. It was Starling's fight. It was a fight he had to win himself.

When at last Starling could free himself from the men who were pounding him on the back, the Deacon was able to stagger to his feet.

"Creased me," he explained. "Neat as a stopper in a bottle. Don't show with my hat on. Buy me a drink, Enoch, an' I'll feel better."

THE celebration which followed was a long one. Dawn found the Desert Eagle devastated as if by a whirlwind, occupied only by Mel Haycort, the Deacon, Enoch Starling and Rig Haynes. Addison Jukes could not truly be called present as he had crawled beneath the table some hours before in search of strays, and had not returned.

Mel Haycort was rolling him gently with one foot. "He keeps wakin' up an' hollerin' if I quit," he told the Deacon. "Thinks he's on a boat now."

Deacon Bottle squinted up at the crack in the roof which the sun had opened, and now through which rain was pouring. "We damn soon will be," he declared, "if this keeps up. Enoch, why in hell don't you get out from under that drip? A water-logged sheriff will be worse than no sheriff at all."

Water was trickling steadily from the ends of Starling's drooping mustache. He regarded the Deacon solemnly. "For two months now I been lickin' myself, like a damn cat, instead of takin' a bath. This here suits me right down to the ground." Working on each feature individually, he managed to scowl. "I ain't forgot the lyin' you done about me in your preachment, though. When folks sober up they just won't believe I was that smart."

Deacon Bottle grinned. "Tell, 'em it was drinkin' Old Pepper that done it." He got up and went over to the bar.

Rig Haynes had been waiting a long time. And he was cold sober. "Deacon, I been wantin' to tell you. Kropp won the Desert Eagle from me. I could come back in it on shares, he said, if I played along an' kep' my mouth shut. I got a family, Deacon. I figgured—oh, hell! When the time come, I couldn't do it!"

Deacon Bottle reached for the Old Pepper. "Hell, Rig, I knew if it came to a showdown you'd back me with your scattergun. That's why I let those wolves pocket me like they did. An' besides, you had so blamed much invested in me by that time, you had to save my hide or go out of business!"

THE END

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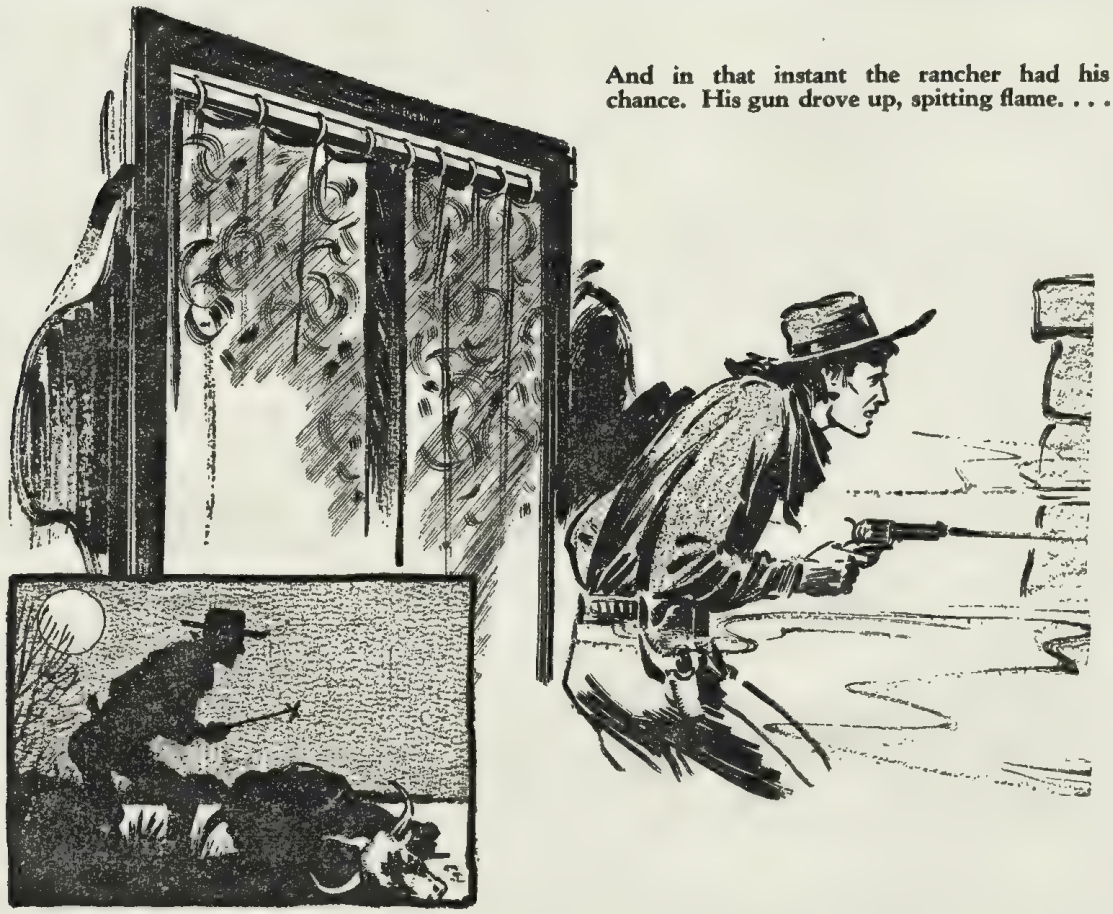
When Blue Blanket Creek



And in that instant the rancher had his chance. His gun drove up, spitting flame. . . .

A neighbor's calves branded in his own iron sent Steve Rainsford to four bitter, burning prison years. Yet, when he returned with his unjust debt marked "Paid in full," he found the cowman who had sent him to that iron-caged hell dead of a bushwhack slug. And, once more, the damning killer sign was—tragically—his own!

CHAPTER ONE

Timed to Murder!

SUDDENLY Steve Rainsford made up his mind. He would see Mary Vane today, now.

It might be another month before that dull prison pallor would wear off entirely, before he would be able to face the world again. But even then, he would be the same only outwardly. Inwardly, he vaguely sensed, something was gone from him—some quality that had been gentle and susceptive, but was now insensitive and adamant; something that had tightened the lean slant of his jaw and sharpened his blue eyes to hard probing slits.

He stared intently at himself in the cracked little mirror that hung above the wash stand. He saw a face in which the eyes were darkly circled. And the mouth was just a pale strip of muscle, flexed to a grim slit beneath a firm, straight nose.

This month he had spent here alone at the ranch house, had improved his appearance but little. The prison brand was still on him, limned in every muscle and feature of his face. With angry abrupt-

Ran Red By Kenneth A. Fowler

Unusual novel of a range where murder walked

ness, he turned from the glass and strode out of the bedroom. In the living room, he picked up his Stetson from the shelf above the fireplace and went on out to the veranda.

Let her see him as he was, he thought savagely as he stepped down from the veranda and walked with a jerky stride toward the corral. Let her see what she and her father had done to him. The hell with waiting till he was all prettied up! Besides, what difference did that make now? Whatever might have been between them once was over and done with now.

Evidently she believed him as guilty as Perry Vane had. And that evidence Perry Vane had brought into court against him had been framed evidence!

Well, they would pay for it now; they would both pay. He'd give Vane a chance to pack up and get out. For the sake of the girl, he'd do that. Then, if Vane refused, it would be an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. For two could play at that game of planting evidence, he determined bitterly. And probably John Ridberg wouldn't weep to see Vane leave. With Sweetgrass Springs the only one water source for the three spreads, Ridberg would be pleased at the departure of his neighbor.

Coming to the corral, he shot his loop for the big gray and was surprised to discover that his fingers had lost none of of their dexterity. Quickly saddling, he drew himself up in the kak and headed out over the sandy ridge toward the Spearhead spread of Perry Vane.

By this short cut it was hardly a twenty-minute ride to the Vane place, and at sight of the low, log ranch house, a sudden pang bit through him as he remembered the many hours he had spent there talking with Mary Vane, telling her of his dreams and ambitions.

A bitter laugh choked him. Ambitions weren't for the kind of jelly-spined hombre he had been. An ambitious man had to be a hard man; an ambitious man never got himself tangled up with a woman so that, after she had thrown him over, he could still feel the old sick hunger for her, even after four years in hell. . . .

HE GLANCED up suddenly. A girl had stepped down from the doorway and was starting to sweep the porch. A shiver of excitement shook him as he watched her. Even to so simple an act as sweeping, Mary Vane imparted an effortless motion. Hungrily, his eyes drew a line around her curved, gingham-sheathed young body. Above the swift movement of the broom he caught a glimpse of her face; the pink slant of a cheek, and the vivid dark red hair against it.

But his aching remembrance was quickly washed away on a rising tide of bitterness. He meant nothing to this girl now; her silence in the face of his conviction had been tantamount to belief in his guilt. She, then, was not to be spared any more than was her father. Perry Vane had sent him to prison on framed evidence and she had believed that evidence, had believed him a thief.

A bitter hardness built up in him as he stepped down and started toward the veranda. At the same instant he was conscious of her sudden startled outcry.

"Steve!"

He walked deliberately to the foot of the steps, then halted, looking up at her with an impersonal gaze. "Where's Perry?" he asked coldly.

"Steve. . . ." She stared at him tensely, her body backed against the front of the house, her gingham bodice taut with her breathlessness.

"It's me, all right," Steve Rainsford said harshly. "Four years in hell make a man look different, don't they?"

"Oh, Steve!" He saw that she, too, had changed; that she looked thinner and paler. "Steve, it was awful. But there wasn't anything I could do."

"Where's Perry? I've got a message for him."

He felt the reproach in her tone, deliberately steeled himself against it. "Steve, you *have* changed. But you ought to know I wouldn't. I never—"

"No," he broke in scornfully, "you haven't changed, Mary. It was my mistake. Four years ago, I just thought you were somebody you weren't. That's all."

For an instant she stared at him in shocked disbelief; then her mouth twisted stiffly and her voice reached him in a choked whisper. "Steve, I—I don't understand. You—you think—"

"I'm not here for post-mortems," he interjected. "I came to talk with Perry. Where is he?"

Mary Vane's blankly staring eyes were suddenly strangely bright with tears.

"He's out mending fence." She started to sweep again, but added, "If you want him, you'll have to come back some other time."

"No," he said flatly. "I don't chase after hombres like him. I'll let you give him the message. Tell him—"

He stopped suddenly. The front door opened and an overall-clad youngster stepped out on the porch. For an instant the boy stood hesitantly, then Steve Rainsford gave him a glance and said in a preoccupied way, "Hello, Bub."

The boy grinned then and started boring with his boot-toe in the floor of the porch. "Hello, Mr. Rainsford. Gee, I didn't savvy you was. . . ."

Mary Vane interrupted sharply, "Go inside, Bub. Mr. Rainsford and I have some business to talk over."

"But, gee, Sis—"

"I said to go inside."

"Aw, all right. But I don't see what's the matter with talkin' with Mr. Rainsford. I ain't seen him since. . . ." He looked embarrassed suddenly and shuffled inside.

Mary Vane loosed a long breath. Then, turning, she slowly brought her dulled, reddened eyes up to Steve Rainsford's. "You can give me your message now," she told him coldly.

"All right." His eyes were suddenly hard and bright, and he chopped out his words. "Tell Perry Vane I'm givin' him a week to sell out and get off this range! Tell him I've come back to get an eye for an eye! Tell him if he isn't gone in a week, to remember he's not the only man that can play frame-up!"

THE girl stood tensed against the front door, her tightened breath molding the firm, full swell of her breasts. She controlled her voice with an effort. "You're wrong about dad, Steve, terribly wrong. Dad's old-fashioned, I know that, and he prosecuted you in court. But that's because the evidence indicated you were guilty. Dad wouldn't ever fake evidence against anybody. Why, if he'd have thought—"

"I'm not interested in what he thought or didn't think!" Steve Rainsford's jaw was set. "Your father sent an innocent man to prison, and by God, he's going to pay for it! You tell him if he's not packed up and out of here in a week, he'll wish he'd gone when he had the chance!"

"I'll tell him." Hard scorn edged the girl's voice. "And you know how much good that will do." She paused, then added in a withering tone, "Perry Vane never stepped back from a fight yet, and I don't guess he'll start now!"

Steve Rainsford's mouth drew tight. "He'll step back, or damned well wish he had! I'm givin' him a chance, but this is one tight where Bible-thumpin' won't do him a bit of good. Either he steps out, or he gets a dose of the same medicine he made me take. And you can tell him it's got a damned bitter taste!"

Mary Vane's knuckles whitened around the broom handle, and for a moment her eyes clung to him with a look of bitter, bewildered hurt. "You'd better go, now," she said. "And don't come back, Steve. I—I don't want to see you again."

"I'll go; don't worry." He turned, aware of a painful leadenness in him as he rose to the saddle. He said, "Remember —" Then stopped suddenly.

For her glance was sweeping past him across the ranch yard, and curiously his eyes followed its direction. A chunky, levi-clad figure had tumbled out of the saddle of a hard-ridden chestnut and now was advancing up the slope towards the veranda, walking with a hard, driving stride.

As the man drew closer Steve Rainsford recognized him as Shorty Holcomb, the Spearhead foreman, but Holcomb went past him without a glance and halted abruptly in front of the veranda.

The man's fat, moon face was streaked with sweat. He took off his hat, his eyes going with a curious reluctance up to the girl's

"I—I rid kind of hard," he panted. "I —I'll have to ketch my breath."

Mary Vane nodded. "Take your time," she said in a tired voice. "It's only more trouble, I expect."

The foreman sucked in a long breath. "Yes'm it's—it's trouble, ma'am."

He hesitated again, and suddenly Steve Rainsford sensed something taut and desperate in the man's irresolution; at the same time he was aware of the dread building up in Mary Vane's thin, tired face.

"It's—it's the Parson, ma'am," Hol-

comb blurted. "There's been an accident."

"Dad!" she cried. "He's hurt!"

Holcomb faltered, "I'm sorry, ma'am, it had to be me to fetch in the news."

The girl looked at him with a slow, dazed stare. Then the broom slid from her slack fingers. "He's dead," she whispered. "You're trying to tell me that father's dead."

Shorty Holcomb looked at her helplessly. "Yes'm," he finished heavily. "Only I didn't aim to bust right out with it this way. . . . Somebody bushwacked him, Miss Mary." His tone fiercely tightened. "But we'll get the dry-gulchin' devil, ma'am. We'll get him if we have to ride clear to Californy an' back!"

STEVE RAINSFORD glanced down from the gray, aware of the girl's stricken face upturned to his.

"You did it!" Mary Vane cried out suddenly. "You had somebody kill him! You had somebody kill him, because you were afraid to do it yourself!" A peal of wild, hysterical laughter throbbed up from her throat. "Now you can be satisfied, Steve Rainsford! You've killed him, do you hear me? You've killed my dad!"

Mary Vane stood with her face to the door, her shoulders quivering in an uncontrollable convulsion of hard, racking sobs.

Steve wanted to look away from her, and when he did turn, it seemed as if the movement would twist off his head. Then there was the sound of a slammed door, and aching silence. The porch was empty; only the broom lay there, like a mute, pathetic symbol of tragedy.

Shorty Holcomb turned, looked up at him.

He remembered Shorty as one of the few who apparently had not taken his guilt for granted, who had maintained an attitude of open-mindedness about him, both before and after the trial.

"Where'd you find him, Shorty?"

"The mud flats," Shorty answered laconically. "Down near Blue Blanket Creek." He slapped on his hat, added, "Reckon he'd stopped to water his hoss. The slug took him spang between the eyes. . . . I've gotta find Jim Tarrant. The Parson was big. I'll need help, gettin' him back."

Steve muttered, almost as though speaking to himself: "I'll be passin' the Flats on my way home. I'll keep out an eye for sign."

Shorty looked at him queerly, and the thought struck Steve that the remark may have sounded odd, coming from him. Did Shorty think he had shot Perry Vane? It occurred to him suddenly that this shooting could be made to look bad for him, since Perry Vane's evidence had sent him to prison. And now Perry Vane was dead —murdered—and the murder had occurred just one month from the date of his discharge from the penitentiary.

To make it still more damaging, he had never been at any pains to conceal his enmity from the owner of the Spearhead; and today he had come here and loudly proclaimed to Mary Vane his intention of running her father off the range!

Shorty Holcomb's voice cut into his thoughts. "Reckon I'd better be huntin' up Jim Tarrant," Shorty grunted. "Kind of a hard feller to ketch hold of, when yuh want him."

For a long moment Steve remained stationary in the saddle, gazing after the retreating figure of the foreman with a thoughtful stare.

CHAPTER TWO

Snake Sign!

FOLLOWING the tortuous course of Blue Blanket Creek as it wound downward through clumps of alder and bracken toward the mud flats below, Steve Rains-

(Continued on page 132)

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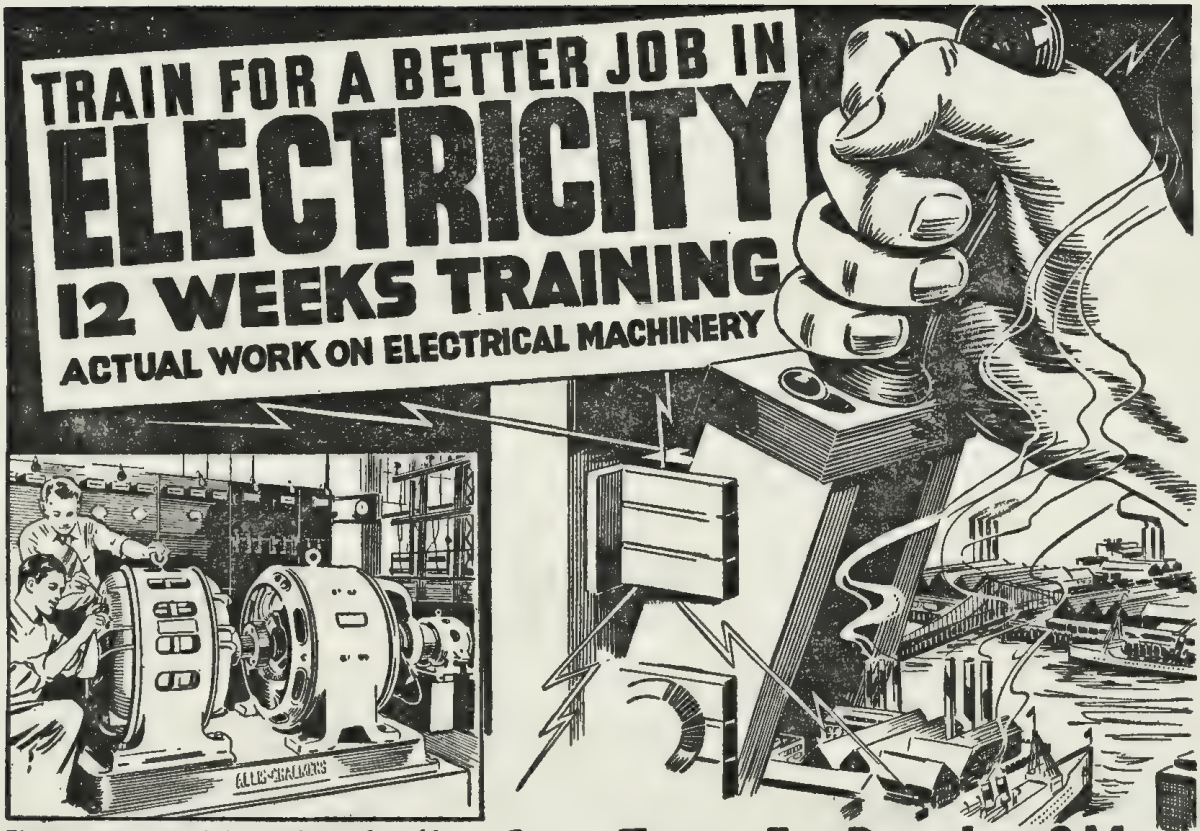

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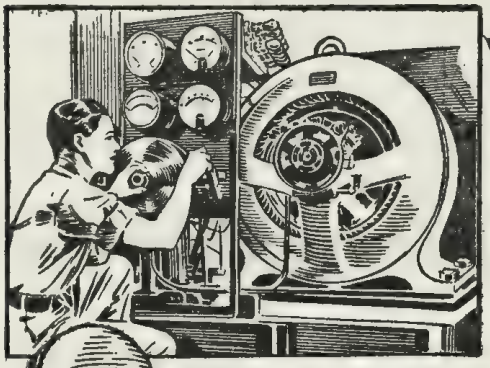

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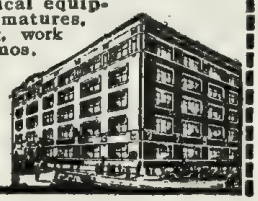

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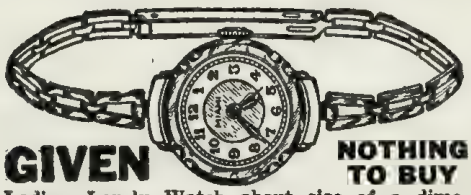

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(Continued from page 130)

ford allowed the gray to set its own easy pace. What hurry was there now?

For four years he had stewed in an earthly hell, checking the dragging days against the time when he would be free to visit retribution upon the head of the man who had sent him away. And now, when finally he was ready to exact payment for the wrong that had been done him, fate mysteriously had snatched away his prey.

A bitter laugh jerked from him. Wasn't that the way of life, always? A man could live for one thing, spend the best years of his life trying to obtain it, only to have it wrenched out of his hands finally by fate or death. . . .

Then mistily, Mary Vane's face rose before him, white and stricken, the way it had been back at the ranch house, her eyes fixed on him in mute piteous appeal.

He tried to blot the image from his mind, but with a strange relentlessness it kept insistently before him. Damn it, he thought angrily, why couldn't he forget her, as she had forgotten him?

With a savage kick, he sent the gray lunging ahead at suddenly swifter gait. There was no use in thoughts such as these, no use in a man letting dead dreams lie hard and heavy against his heart. The best thing for him to do would be to pull up stakes. Sell the Box R; take whatever he could get for it and shag out. Ridberg ought to be glad enough to get it. And there wouldn't be much satisfaction in taking out his spite on the girl, even conceding that he could force himself to that extremity. No, he'd go and see Ridberg.

The gray was heading now into the narrow draw that led downward into the mud flats; a low strip of ground where the creek abruptly widened before pinching together again to foam back between its screening border of alders.

Suddenly Steve Rainsford tensed. Before him, sprawled out awkwardly a few

yards from the creek bank was the figure of a man.

Steve halted the gray, studying the motionless form with a somber concentration. The man lay face down in the moist loam, his right arm stretched toward the water, as though he had made a last desperate effort to reach it.

The uncertainty of life struck home to Steve as he stared down at the crumpled shape. Men lived according to their lights, but they were queer, unpredictable beings, at best. There was this Perry Vane, for example, whom other men called "the Parson."

This was the man who, while preaching honesty with a zealot's fervor, had, with a crude and deliberate obviousness, changed several of his Spearhead-branded steers into Rainsford Box R's. And the court, cognizant of Perry Vane's reputation for almost fanatical honesty, had accepted the evidence as incontrovertible.

How, pondered Steve, could a man preach honesty with his tongue, and hypocritically practise the exact opposite in his acts? Was it because Perry Vane had disapproved of his intentions toward Nancy that he had done this thing to him? Or had greed been the motive, an ambition to force out the Box R and ultimately acquire those holdings for himself?

Slowly, Steve Rainsford shook his head. It made little difference now about the motive. The damage had been done.

HE GLANCED about, studying the nearby terrain. This was all lowland here, but farther up, northward from the creek, a high bluff reared, its rim crowned with a long, slab-like boulder. A rifleman hidden out behind that boulder, Steve reflected, could pick off a rider down here at the creek clearing with a single shot.

He suddenly slapped the gray with his hat and said, "Come on, Texican. We're goin' down and have a look-see."

The horse passed out of the draw and started down gingerly towards the bank of the creek, its hoofs sucking noisily in the muddy ground. A short distance downcreek Steve's eye caught a flutter of color from an alder shrub.

"Looks like somebody forgot their neck gear, Texican," he grunted. "Maybe we'd better see—"

The abrupt slam of the shot cut him short, drove back the breath in his throat. Twice more the hidden gun crashed.

Twin geysers spurt from the water of the creek, and at the same instant Steve wheeled the gray and drove it belly-deep into the stream, not stopping until he was in a screen of alder thicket. A tightening moment of silence, then three more shots beat clamorously into the lull, snipping out bits of twig from the bushes to his right.

Steve loosed a long breath. No further shots came, but the hidden marksman might merely be reloading, or waiting for him to come out.

He waited while the icy creek water lapped at his ankles, spreading a gradual numbness into his legs and up through his body. This silence might be a trap, and if it was. . . .

Another thought struck him. He had told himself before that a rifleman hidden out on that bluff couldn't miss a target down here in the creek clearing. Had this hidden marksman missed him *deliberately?* Had he merely been trying to spook him into high-tailing?

Puzzledly, he shook his head. It didn't seem to make sense. And yet. . . .

He waited five minutes, then ten. Nothing happened. He couldn't stay much longer where he was, that was certain. His legs felt paralyzed with the cold, and the horse also was beginning to show signs of distress. Suddenly deciding, he reined the gray on up creek.

He came to shallower water, then to a section where the alders thinned out, hiding him only partially. Boldly he rode

out into the clear, swinging away from the flats. He half expected to hear a bullet come singing past him, but none did.

Under cover of a rock outcrop he pulled up and waited, watching the bluff. No movement rewarded his vigil. He decided that the hidden rifleman, whoever he had been, was gone. But he still couldn't take chances. He had to be careful. He swung the gray down a concealing draw toward the back of the bluff. . . .

When he reached it he dismounted and started up the brush-strewn embankment on foot. It was a stiff climb, and he worked his way cautiously, carefully avoiding loose rocks. But he found on reaching the top that his precautions had been unnecessary. The bird had flown. But evidences of the bird's presence were still there!

He reached down behind the massive block of granite that had shielded the ambusher and picked up six cartridge shells. Five had been shot from the same rifle—a .30-30, but the sixth was from a gun of more unusual caliber—a .25-35. Obviously the shells from the .30-30 had furnished the slugs that had been used to pepper him. But the .25-35, he suspected, had been the murder gun.

Thoughtfully, he tucked the .25-35 and one of the .30-30's in the pocket of his shirt, buttoning the flap.

The murderer, it was now plain, had left somebody behind him to keep a watch on the mud flats. Why? Suddenly he remembered the bandana he had seen fluttering from a bush a few yards down from where the body had lain. He'd been heading towards the bandana when the first shot had come, causing him to turn and dive his horse into the shelter of the alders. Strange. . . !

He was frowning as he went back to the gray. Mounting, he headed it back towards the flats having the disturbed feeling of one who has seen certain parts of a puzzle, yet being completely unable to piece them together. Coming to the flats, he found everything apparently as it had been before. No one had come for the body yet, and down-creek a few yards the bandana still fluttered from the alder thicket.

He roweled the gray over to it and picked it off the bush. As he did so, a hoarse exclamation jerked from his lips.

The bandana was of beautiful glossy silk, with a name embroidered on its black border in vivid orange. And the name was Steve Rainsford!

CHAPTER THREE

Gunman's Bluff

IT WAS a full minute before Steve Rainsford felt a return, halfway at least, to calm processes of thought. His scarf, a few yards from the dead body of Perry Vane, the man on whom he had sworn vengeance! The scarf Mary Vane herself had embroidered and given him as a Christmas present, five years before.

He hadn't missed it out of his dresser back at the Box R because it had been packed away in a bottom drawer, packed away so that he could forget it.

His blue eyes hardened. The implication was plain. Somebody was trying to frame him for the murder of Perry Vane—someone, obviously, who knew that, even with such flimsy circumstantial evidence as this, the finger of suspicion could be made to point inevitably to him.

Then another thought hammered at him. Whoever was attempting to frame him now may have been the same person who framed him for the rebranding of those Spearhead cows of Perry Vane. Perry Vane might have prosecuted him in good faith—but on evidence manufactured by another hand!

For a long moment he sat the saddle

(Continued on page 136)

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(Continued from page 134)

without moving, his mind racing before the swift current of this new thought. His own spread, together with those of his two neighbors, Perry Vane at the Spearhead, and John Ridberg at the JR, bordered on one another, and all originally had been part of a single grant. When this grant had been split up for sale, the deeds had stipulated that the water rights should be open equally to the use of the three owners, and that only in event of possible reversion of the property to a single owner would this be voided.

Therefore, with ownership of the Spearhead devolving upon a girl, who could easily be forced to sell out, and with himself a likely candidate for a sheriff's noose, one man and one man only would stand to profit by the events of the last few hours. That was John Ridberg.

Steve now suddenly realized the explanation for those shots that had been fired down at him from the bluff. Whoever had been up there had been afraid he would notice the scarf and ride off with the evidence.

All at once he remembered the shells he had picked up back on the bluff. One of those shells had been from a .25-35—a caliber gun very rarely found. If—

A musing gleam momentarily softened the hard blue of his glance; then, as if in sudden decision, his hand drew back abruptly on the reins and he turned the gray towards his own backtrail.

A long chance, he reflected as he rode; but one that might mark for him the end of a long trail . . . . if taking that chance brought the results he counted on.

HALF an hour later he came in sight of the first JR out-buildings. These he carefully skirted, keeping to what little cover the terrain afforded while he cautiously scouted the spread's layout.

By careful reconnoitering, he was able

to keep out of sight of the house as he dipped down behind the hill in back of it to come around on the other side into a low stand of liveoak and thick brush. From here he had a good view of the barn and corral.

He couldn't see the front of the house, but there was no sign of movement in the rear. The back door of the barn was half open, but the barn itself appeared deserted, and by crossing around the back of it, on foot, he should be able to reach the corral unobserved.

He stepped suddenly down from the gray and quickly hitched it to the bole of a liveoak. Then, with a swift, cautious glance he strode quickly past the barn and into view of the corral. Half a dozen horses stood within the big lodgepole pine enclosure, but none showed signs of having recently been ridden.

Despair clutched at Steve. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe he'd just been doing a lot of futile, wishful thinking, back there at the mud flats. Maybe. . . . Suddenly he stiffened.

The barn! Naturally they wouldn't have left any of the evidence out here in the open, but the horses could be in the barn; might even yet be saddled.

He turned and cautiously retraced his steps. Before the half-opened door he paused. He could see nothing at first, but his ears caught a sound that sent hope driving up through his heart again—the dull, heavy stamp of a hoof.

Deliberately he edged past the door and stepped into the musty, dimly lit interior. Staring through the pallid half-light he made out four box stalls, built on opposite sides of the broad passageway near the front door. And in the nearest of the two left-side stalls there was a horse!

Watchfully Steve advanced towards the stall. Then, almost up to it, he stopped, conscious of a sudden jarring stab of excitement. The horse hadn't even been unsaddled! But that wasn't what held him momentarily rooted, staring with abruptly jammed breath. This big, star-faced black gelding was the horse John Ridberg himself invariably rode!

The saddle was equipped with a rifle boot, and jutting out of the top of it was the polished walnut stock of a Winchester. Steve's breath caught as he drew the long, sleek weapon out of its sheath. He drew the bolt and stared into the chamber, feeling his heart hammer solidly against his chest. The chamber held five loaded shells, but the sixth was missing. And the rifle was a .25-35!

Here was proof; real proof. But where was the other horse—the horse of the rider who had shot down at him with the .30-30? Well, that was less important; one of Ridberg's hands probably had handled that job.

What he'd better do now was to ride at once for the sheriff, shag out of here before somebody spotted him. If he could get away unobserved, and then return before anybody suspected anything. . . .

An icy prickle raced down his back and unaccountably he shivered. Maybe, for no good reason, he was getting boogery. For except for the restless stomping of the gelding he hadn't heard a sound.

He stiffened. *That* was a sound.

Before he could judge its location a voice stabbed through the eerie light.

"Don't move, Rainsford! Put that rifle back in the boot, then turn around slow and face the door!"

HE FELT the sickening pound of shock in him, conscious momentarily of the breath packed painfully in his aching lungs. He punched the rifle back in its scabbard, then faced the door.

Two men stood there, one with a gun clamped solidly in a meaty fist, his companion posted a little to one side, without any gun.

Steve immediately recognized the man with the gun as John Ridberg. A big man,

with a heavy-jowled face but small, alertly moving dark eyes, Ridberg stood for a moment deliberately silent. Then he said. "Overplayed your hand, sort of, haven't you, Rainsford?"

Steve forced his voice to the evenness of Ridberg's casual tone. "Not me, Ridberg." Despite the weakness of the cards he held, he decided to bluff. "You framed me once, Ridberg, but you won't get away with it twice. Joe Havegood, my foreman, knows what I found out down at the mud flats this morning. If anything happens to me, he'll—"

"You're lying," Ridberg broke in flatly. "Havegood's in town, drunk. I had somebody see to that." He motioned with the gun, speaking brusquely to the man at his side. "All right, Witt, take his gun. And that scarf. We'll have to put it back before the sheriff can get out here." He added in an undertone, "You know what to do, Witt , . . . just as we'd planned. . . ."

As the man stepped forward out of the shadows, Steve suddenly remembered. Witt Texel was one of those who had testified at his trial for the prosecution. Only he hadn't known, then, that Texel worked for John Ridberg. Apparently there had been a great many things he hadn't known then; things he was finding out now—after it was too late.

Cold fury ran through him as he felt Witt Texel's hands exploring swiftly through his pockets. If only he *had* told somebody, if only he hadn't cut himself off from all help!

He felt his gun being drawn out of its holster. At the same instant he was aware of Ridberg, staring intently at Witt Texel, and saw him give Texel a deliberate nod.

He felt Texel's hand gripping his arm, tried vainly to jerk away as he saw the gun barrel come swishing down at him. A hollow roaring shook his eardrums. Then suddenly there was only darkness, and oblivion. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

A Gambling Chance

STEVE RAINSFORD was conscious at first of a mere drowsy lassitude; then he was aware of the vicious, hacking pain in his head and the aching throb of his temples. His eyes smarted and he forced them open painfully.

He tried to raise from his prone position on the floor and found that he couldn't move a muscle. He was bound so tightly that the rawhide thongs were cutting through his flesh; and the bandana knotted across his mouth hardly permitted him to breathe.

Ridberg and Texel certainly weren't taking chances, he thought grimly. By now, they were probably on their way back to the creek with the scarf. Then they'd come for him with the sheriff. There would be evidence of the scarf; perhaps a few perjured witnesses from the JR crew. And then. . . .

He tensed suddenly. Somebody was knocking cautiously on the door, calling his name in a low, urgent voice.

Futilely he tried to answer, but the words were choked back in his throat by the savage pressure of the gag.

Hope throbbed through him again as he lifted his tightly bound legs and let them drop back abruptly to the floor. Biting his lips against the agony of the effort, he did it again. And then again.

He stopped and tensely listened, his forehead arced with a glistening band of sweat. For a lengthening moment there was no sound, then the silence was abruptly ruptured by a shattering blow at the door.

There came a second hammering smash, and the door was wrenched open. Light flooded into the room, and Steve saw young Bub Vane poised in the doorway, his fingers gripping a long-helved ax.

HIS hot, eager breath pelted Steve's face as he dropped to his knees and took out his jack-knife. He sawed vigorously, and one by one the rawhide thongs parted.

Steve reached for the gag and with a grunt of relief pulled it off. A dizzying pain shot through him; at the same moment a queer pressure built up in his throat as he felt Bub Vane's arms around him, helping him to sit up.

The boy said anxiously, "You feel all right now, Mr. Rainsford? You—you ain't stove up or nothin'?"

Steve forced out a grin, then quickly suppressed it, remembering Perry Vane. Obviously the kid knew, now. His eyes were puffed and red, but under a scatter of ragged yellow hair his pinched, grime-streaked face was set stoically.

Steve spoke with a deliberate gruffness. "Naw, I'm all right, kid." He winced as he lunged suddenly to his feet and stood shakily, looking around him. This was the woodshed they'd locked him in, he now saw; and the kid evidently had been forced to smash the lock to get him out.

His voice was husky as he asked, "How'd you savvy I was here, Bub?"

The boy looked at him, a troubled expression in his eyes. Then he burst out: "I heard 'em talkin' about yuh, Mr. Rainsford. I knowed they was lyin', but they—they said you killed my dad! I listened till I heard 'em say where you was, an' then I skinned out the back way an' rid over here to try and find yuh."

"Look, Bub," Steve's arm-hooked gently around the boy's blue-shirted shoulder, "just take it easy now, and start at the beginning. Who thinks that I—who is it you're talkin' about, kid?"

"John Ridberg and Witt Texel!" blurted Bub Vane. "They're over to our house now, tryn' to get Mary to sell out. Gee, Mr. Rainsford, I'm afraid she's gonna do it, too!"

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29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
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28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
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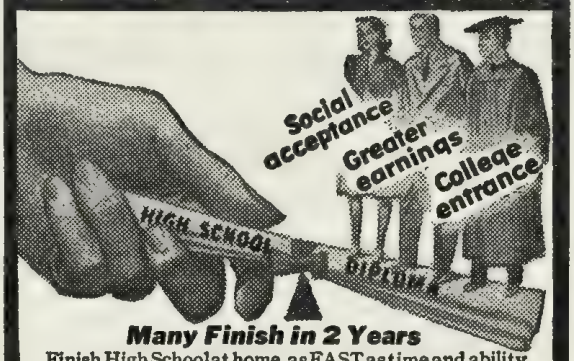

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Steve Rainsford's glance went bleakly past the boy's. A cold hardness came into his voice. "You got a horse, Bub?"

"Oh, sure! I rid over on Sis's roan." The boy's eyes showed an eager gleam. "And your gray's out back, Mr. Rainsford! I seen him where I picketed out the roan."

"You'd better call me Steve, Bub." There was a sudden softness in Steve Rainsford's tone. He moved to the door. "Come on, pardner. It's time we fogged out of here."

"Gee," breathed Bub Vane, "could we really be pardners, Steve? I mean—"

"Sure," Steve said absently. "Come on, now, Bub."

When they reached the thicket of live-oak where the horses were picketed, the boy went to the roan and took something out of a saddlebag. Then he crossed to Steve, holding out a gun-belt and bone-butted sixgun.

"These—these was my dad's," he said with a catch in his voice. "I—I reckoned you might need 'em."

Something jammed in Steve Rainsford's throat. The kid's eyes looked up to him, and Steve sensed the unspoken approbation in them. A cool tingle touched the back of his neck as he buckled on the belt that had been Perry Vane's. At the same time, a full sense of the irony of the situation struck him. Here he was, wearing the gun of the man he had intended to destroy; wearing it now in the hope of destroying Perry Vane's murderer!

Bub Vane didn't move. He said in a hesitant tone, "Steve?"

Steve Rainsford swung up to the gray. He said, with a faint show of annoyance, "Come on now, Bub. We've got to hurry."

"I'm comin'." Bub Vane started boring with his boot-toe into the soft loam underfoot. "But I was jest wondering'," he said. "Pardners hadn't oughta have no secrets from each other. So I reckon I better tell

yuh this now, before—before yuh talk with Mary."

The sound of the girl's name gave Steve a momentary pang; he said with gentle reassurance, "It's all right, Bub. You needn't be scared to talk to a pardner."

Bub Vane lifted his thin, dirt-smudged face to the man on the horse. "It's—it's about Mary," he got out reluctantly. "I reckon I savvy why yuh—why yuh don't like her no more." His glance desperately held on Steve's. Then he blurted, "Mary ain't to blame fur nothin', Steve—honest! She—she wrote yuh plenty times while you was—that time you was away."

Steve Rainsford's thin lips twisted grimly against the somber mask of his face. Finally he said in a coldly toneless voice. "You'd better tell the rest of it."

The boy looked up at him. "It—it ain't much to tell, Steve." His snub nose tightened with a jerky snuffle. "It's jest—jest that Mary wrote yuh, but dad, he never let the letters git mailed. When she'd ast me to mail one, I had to give it to dad. He said no daughter o' his was gonna write a—a rustler. And he said if I ever tol' her what he was doin', he'd whup the livin' Moses outta me."

"Sure," Steve said thickly, "I understand, kid." He drew in a long breath and looked bleakly away. A weight of bitter remorse pressed down in him. He'd been wrong about Mary Vane, just as he'd been wrong about her father. He knew that now; knew it, ironically, when it was too late. And now, like the blundering fool he was, he had damaged their relationship beyond repair.

He brought his stony glance back to the boy. "Better fork your bronc, Bub," he said in a hard tone. "I don't aim to miss seein' those gents your sister's entertainin' over at the Spearhead."

Bub Vane mounted with alacrity. "Gee, Steve," he breathed happily, "then yuh ain't proddy with me no more? We kin—we're still pardners?"

A welling pity mounted in Steve Rainsford as he stared across at the forlorn little button in his cut-down levis and run-over, man's-size boots.

"Sure, Bub," he said softly, "we'll be pardners as long as you like." He wheeled the gray. And in grim silence, they started toward the Spearhead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bullets for Spearhead Guests!

WHEN they were in sight of the Spearhead buildings, Steve reined up and said: "Now look, Bub. I want you to take these horses into the barn so they won't be seen, savvy? And I reckon you'd better stay there and give 'em a good rubdown."

The boy looked at him with a hurt expression.

"Aw, gee, Steve, I wanted to go with you. I thought you said we was—"

"I said we were pardners, didn't I?" Steve interrupted quietly. Earnestly, he gripped the boy's arm. "Look, Bub, if we're going to be pardners we've got to work together, savvy?"

He dismounted, conscious of Bub Vane's eyes following him rebelliously.

Bub said, "Aw, all right, then," and came down from the roan and grudgingly caught the reins Steve tossed at him. Then Steve was moving with a long, free stride out past the barn and toward the ranch house.

He reached the back door without being hailed, and slipped quietly into the deserted kitchen. A muffled sound of voices came to him from the living room in the front. He passed cautiously through an empty bedroom and came to a curtained doorway.

"But what's the use of waiting?" John Ridberg was asking in a smooth, even voice. "Sell out to me now, and I'll give you ten thousand cash. Wait a month, two

months—" his tone hardened, and a note of veiled threat crept into it—"well, if I had to wait, my price might go down."

"I know," Mary Vane answered tiredly, "you said all that before. But I—" She stopped, and Steve sensed suddenly the weary resignation in her tone. "Oh, I suppose it's all right. But I ought to have a little more time to think it over. Half of this would be Bub's some day. He ought to know—"

"A kid," interposed Witt Texel scornfully. "Come on, John. I said you were wasting your time with her."

"Shut up," Ridberg said. "I'll handle this." His voice went to Mary Vane again, smooth, self-assured, but still with that suggestion of threat in it. "I think," he said softly, "that Miss Vane will listen to reason. I think she understands the dangers of a girl trying to run a spread like this alone. Suppose rustlers hit her, for instance? Suppose they rustled every bit of stock she had?"

Steve, tensed against the doorjamb, heard the girl's tight gasp, then a low, whimpering cry. He moved the crimson drapes slightly and peered out.

The girl and John Ridberg were seated at opposite ends of a long library table, and Mary Vane had her hands to her face, quietly sobbing. Texel stood over by a window, a little behind and to the right of Ridberg.

Steve Rainsford's left hand knotted up a fold of the curtain; his right went down and came up gripping Perry Vane's Colt. At the same instant he snapped back the drape and stepped abruptly through the doorway.

John Ridberg stared at him apoplectically. Witt Texel took a jerky step forward and blurted, "Rainsford!"

"Don't move," Steve said levelly. He glanced obliquely at Mary Vane. "Mary, step back out of the way. I might have to kill one of these skunks before the law does, if they try anything funny."

He heard the girl's dismayed gasp, was aware of her white, tense face, her wide eyes staring at him. But his hard, intense glance was on Ridberg and Texel.

Ridberg's voice came across to him, hoarse with restrained fury. "You won't get away with this, Rainsford! You're loco if you think anybody's going to take your word against mine."

Steve said, "Maybe not as loco as you think, Ridberg," And he saw Ridberg's glance go deliberately back to Witt Texel. Texel stood with his left hand held high, gripping a window drape, and Steve had a momentary sense of wordless communication between the two men.

Then, before this thought could go any farther in him, Ridberg looked back at him and jeered, "You're a jailbird, Rainsford—a convicted thief. A thief's evidence won't count for much in a court of law!"

"I reckon the evidence of that .25-35 will count," Steve returned quietly. "I've got a hunch you're the only rancher in the valley with a gun of that caliber. It won't make any difference what—"

A ripping, jingling crash of the window pane drowned out his words, sent his glance for a flickering instant towards Witt Texel.

And in that instant John Ridberg had his chance. His gun drove up spitting flame.

A HAMMERING roar filled the room, and Steve Rainsford was conscious of a savage, wrenching pain in his shoulder. Simultaneously his finger let go on the trigger of the Colt and a second explosion drummed dissonantly through the echoes of the first. He saw Ridberg reel backward as if momentarily blinded; almost at the same moment he was aware of Witt Texel's gun lifting.

He snapped a second shot. Texel's gun dropped and he saw Texel stagger violently backward and crash through the window.

He jerked his gaze back to Ridberg just as Ridberg punched another shot at him. He felt the impact of the slug raking hotly across his cheek, had a dim consciousness of centering his own gun on Ridberg's chin. The Colt bucked with a roar and for a moment there seemed to be an anvil in Steve's head, pounded by a thousand vicious little hammers. A red haze puffed up in front of his eyes and he felt his knees buckling. Then blackness rushed in, and he fell into a dark, swirling abyss. . . .

STEVE RAINSFORD was conscious of a vague, pleasant sense of half-awareness at first. He was lying on a soft bed, and the window shade was down, giving the room a cool, satisfying dimness. Now somewhere in that dimness a step sounded, and he drew tensely alert.

A halting voice spoke. "Steve, it's—it's me. You awake?"

He remembered now; the kid; Mary, in the living room with those two men . . . . The shoot-out. . . .

He sat up suddenly. The movement drove a knifing pain through his shoulder. The shoulder was bandaged tightly.

He said, "Sure, kid, I'm awake. Pull up the shade, will you?"

He heard it go up; light flooded the room. He blinked against the sudden glare, then swung painfully and planted his feet on the floor. He felt a little dizzy, he realized, and for a moment Bub Vane, standing over against the wall, seemed a blurred shadow against the blue wallpaper. Then as his eyes grew accustomed to the light the kid's face became distinct.

"Gee, Steve," boyish awe bubbled in the kid's voice, "yuh got 'em both! I—I heard the shots an' come runnin'. Then Mary an' me, we got yuh in here on the bed. Yuh—yuh feelin' some better now?"

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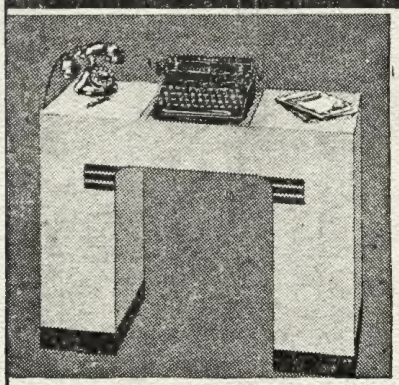

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Poems—Songwriters

Songwriters. Interesting Proposition. Write PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-48, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Send your poem today for immediate consideration. RICHARD BROTHERS, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

POEMS WANTED to be set to music. Free examination. Send poems. McNeil, Master of Music, 510-A South Alexandria, Los Angeles, Calif.

WANTED—Poems for musical setting. Submit for consideration. Phonograph transcriptions made. Keenan's Studio, PP, Box 2140, Bridgeport, Conn.

FREE—Inspiring booklet describing songwriting opportunities. Allied Music, Dept. 20, Box 507, Cincinnati, Ohio.

MUSIC COMPOSED to your poems by HIT songwriter! SONG SERVICE, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York.

Rare Coins—Old Money Wanted

NEW, very complete COIN BOOK. Send 50c. A. FRENCH, Route 1, Troy, N. Y.

Tentatively, Steve stood. His legs trembled and he clung to the bed post a moment. Then he said, "Sure, I'm all right," and started toward the door.

Bub Vane cried after him, "Gee, Steve, you ain't goin' a'ready, are yuh? Nancy said for me to keep yuh—"

Harshly, Steve said, "I told you I was all right, didn't I?" Something besides physical weakness seemed to be weighting his legs, but he went on.

He had to get out of here before Mary saw him. He didn't want her polite, perfunctory thanks; the thing he did want he had put forever beyond his reach.

He passed through the living room, came out upon the veranda. He went down the steps, but at the bottom he paused and clutched at the newel post to steady himself.

From behind him Bub Vane pleaded, "Gee, Steve, yuh hadn't oughta try an' ride now! Gosh, how we gonna be pardners if yuh ride off an' I don't hardly never see yuh again?"

Steve reluctantly relinquished his grip on the post. "It'll be all right, kid," he said gruffly. "We'll see each other." He started toward the barn. Then he felt a twinge of remorse, and called back, "You come on over when you get a chance."

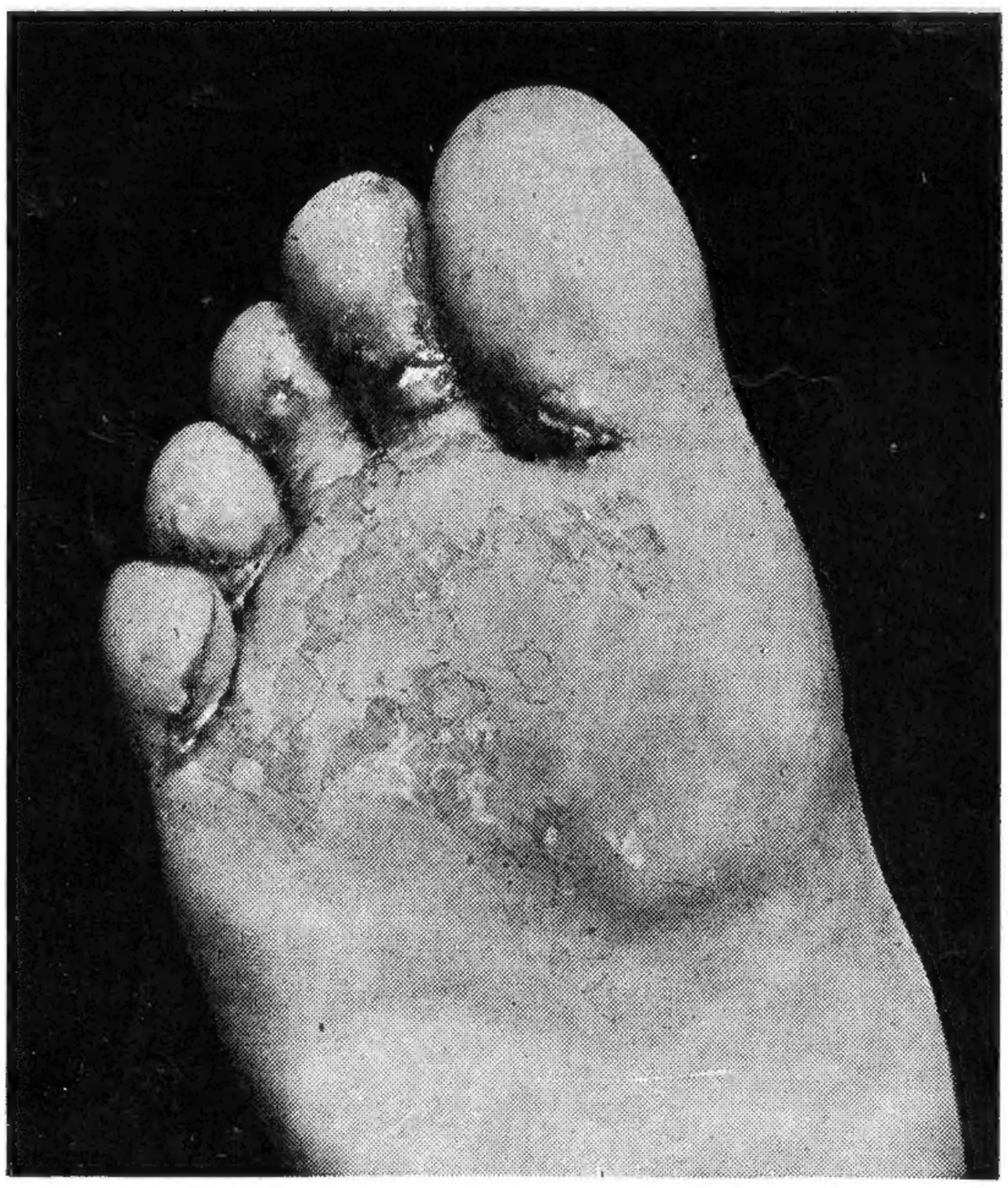
Before any answer could come, the front door slammed and another voice called suddenly: "Steve! Steve, wait!"

A sharp note of urgency rang in the voice, but there was something else too, something Steve Rainsford could never have precisely defined, but which caused him to halt and swing around.

Mary Vane was running toward him from the veranda, running fiercely, and there was that look in her eyes which told of miracles.

Steve Rainsford waited with caught breath. He had never believed in miracles . . . . Until now!

THE END



ITCHING FEET

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Send Coupon
Don't Pay Unless Relieved

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

HERE'S HOW TO RELIEVE IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ; whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show, H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin which enables it to get to parasites that exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try; so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot, why wait a day longer.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today

GORE PRODUCTS, INC. **P. P.**
815 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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"Knowing this, it's natural for me to smoke Luckies myself. And that goes for most auctioneers, buyers and warehousemen!"

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